NARRATIVE, BODY AND GAZE; REPRESENTATIONS OF ACTION HEROINES IN CONSOLE VIDEO GAMES AND GAMER SUBJECTIVITY

Katherine Reynolds

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Committee:

Becca Cragin, Advisor
Jeffrey Brown
Jeremy Wallach
ABSTRACT

Becca Cragin, Advisor

Gender and video games has become a hot topic for scholars and lay people a like in recent years. Despite this universal interest in the subject, little has been done to document the way in which formal features of video games affect the ways in which women are represented in-games or situate video games in the current gender politics of both third-wave feminist and post-feminism. This thesis examines the prevalence of post-feminist in the narrative and bodily depictions of female protagonists, by focusing on some of the unique formal features of video games. Secondly, it examines the ways that the repetition of specific images of women create a gendered discourse in the imagined video game community which in turn constructs and disciplines the woman gamer subject in specific ways.
To Mark and Shady
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INTRODUCTION

Studies on video games began in the 1980’s as video games began to appear in people’s homes. In the 1990’s with the introduction of video game consoles and more varied games, these studies diversified and intensified. Of particular concern in many video game studies is the presentation of violence, race, and gender. Christine Ward Gailey is one of the first people to look at gender and class in the context of video games. Through her analysis of different gaming genres and the children who play them, she finds that in most games there is a stereotypically gendered and racialized “good” woman (Gailey, 87). For example “Good” women are “hierarchically organized and function as motivations and rewards for bravery,” such as the princesses that are the end rewards of games like Mario Bros. or Zelda (Gailey, 87). The racial component enters into play when “princesses” are juxtaposed with “tough” women; “‘Tough’ women are rarely blond; ‘princesses’ are rarely anything else. Dark-haired women can be good or bad.” (Gailey, 87). So while blonde, presumably white women are always good rewards, a player must learn to be careful with any dark-haired woman encountered in a game.

Further studies have conducted content analyses on particular popular video games. Tracy L. Deitz found that after analyzing 33 of the most popular games for Sega Genesis and Super Nintendo that only 15% of women were portrayed as heroes or as action characters, 21% of women were portrayed in a “damsel in distress” role, but that ultimately, “The most common portrayal of women was actually the complete absence of women at all” (Dietz, 434-435).

Building on her research, others have engaged in analyses of gender. One of the most recent attempts to study race and gender in video games is the article “The Virtual Census: Representations of Gender, Race and Age in Video Games.” This article conducts a much larger content analysis of gender, race, and age in video games and the way in which these are
consumed by different genders, races, and ages. While valuing previous studies for their endeavors, this article also critiques previous studies for using so few video games for samples. For this article researchers categorized 133 games. Their findings support previous articles that found that men are over-represented in video games. Overall, they found that 85.23% of video game characters were male, while 14.77% were female, as well as the fact that “Whites and Asians are over-represented and all other [racial] groups are underrepresented (Williams et al., 825). While these numbers are useful in providing a clear reason why representation in video games is an important area of study, they should be thought of as a starting point for research in this field. More qualitative analyses need to be done to understand how the small percentages of minorities in video games are actually represented, not just whether they are present or not.

In addition to content analysis, much consideration has been given to the ways that children play games, and the way that games are created for specific genders, and the themes prevalent in the book *From Barbie To Mortal Kombat*, edited by Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins. The follow up book, *Beyond Barbie & Mortal Kombat: New Perspectives on Gender and Gaming*, continues the discussion of these themes, paying close attention to girl games, girl players, and girl designers, with little attention on the mainstream heroines of gaming themselves.

The majority of these studies have been conducted by scholars in the fields of media studies, sociology or psychology. Coming from a more interdisciplinary humanities field, with an emphasis on feminist cultural studies and feminist theory, provides me with a different lens with which to view these studies and the representation of gender in video games in general. I appreciate and understand the necessity and usefulness of knowing the demographics of race, gender, age in popular video games; it provides an excellent foundation for any sort of critique of
the video game industry on the grounds of race, gender and age. However, a content analysis on gender, race, and age does not present a full analysis on the way gender, race, and age are presented in video games. It tells us how many men, women, black, Asian, white, Hispanic, Indian, old, young, adult, etc. characters are present, but it does not demonstrate how these characters are gendered and racialized through narrative and gameplay. To explore gender in videos ultimately requires tools that feminist theorists have developed, namely the separation of sex, gender, and sexuality as discrete categories. It is necessary to know not just the percentages of representation of the sexes, but an understanding of how these sexes are presented and understood by gamers.

The purpose of this thesis is to address how female heroines in single-player games are presented and understood within the gaming community at large. While the majority of women in videogames do function as damsels, the few remaining heroines require a more complex analysis, utilizing a combination of film theory, feminist theory, queer theory, and game theory to adequately address the ways that heroines are represented through narrative and play. Consequentially, a necessary aspect of this type of research is engaging the text, in this case, video games. Virtual ethnographers such as Christine Hine, Bonnie Nardi and Tom Boelestorff have demonstrated the necessity of playing the game whose community is being studied. Though the focus of this thesis is characters in single-player games, the games similarly need to be played to understand how they function in the gaming community and how gamers experience characters.

Video games are an interactive medium. Unlike film, video games are made specifically for player interaction. Attempting to analyze video game characters outside of the context of play and interactivity is a fool's errand. The context of the video game, perspective, single-player,
multiplayer, “camera” techniques, controls, narrative and, ultimately, the notion of play itself are all important aspects for further understanding the ways in which characters are gendered in video games. All of those aspects must be examined in conjunction with the role of the player himself (here using the gendered pronoun “him” is a mediated step as the majority of gamers are conceived of as male). Without someone playing the video game, it is an impossible artifact to study. So it is only when someone plays a game that the nature of the game is revealed.

In my research for this thesis, I have played every game discussed in detail, resulting in many, many hours of gameplay, not all of it enjoyable. The process of playing games provides a richer understanding of a game's narrative, and how the game play fits in with that narrative, ultimately providing a more nuanced understanding of a game or heroine. For example, through playing *Tomb Raider* video games, the intelligence and strength that is narratively given to Lara Croft is mirrored in the game play. The player must guide Lara through complex caverns, executing magnificent acrobatic leaps and flips, emphasizing her strong physicality while the mazes and puzzles that the player must guide Lara through emphasize her cunning and intelligence. In this way, play and narrative often work together reinforcing each other in various ways. For this reason, this thesis rejects the ongoing (though nearly dead) argument in game studies about ludology vs. narratology. Ludology and narratology must be combined to come to a fuller understanding of the way that games work, and I believe that playing games is one method that demonstrates the necessity of understanding how play and narrative combine to form a larger picture.

Clearly, there are some barriers to this method. Time is a barrier, with most video games averaging twenty hours to “beat,” which is over ten times as long as the average movie. Skill is one barrier that is hard to overcome for scholars who have not grown up playing videogames.
Though I personally consider myself a gamer, not all of the games I played for my research were easy for me to progress through, causing a good deal of frustration. However, even those frustrations were useful in studying the accessibility of these representations of femininity. A second barrier is the acquisition of games: game systems can be a monetary challenge or simply one of availability. Out-dated video games are difficult to acquire, and finding the right system to play them on can be another large challenge once acquiring a game. In those cases, it is not always possible to play a game one is interested in writing about, which may necessitate simply watching videos of game play online. However, when readily available I advise all scholars to attempt to play games they intend to study in order to fully understand the entire experience that a game offers.

Playing games is just one aspect to developing a deeper analysis of femininity in video games. These characters also need to be situated in the larger context of representations of femininity in media in general, and situated within their individual gaming genres. The focus of this thesis is on action heroines in single-player video games, which must be situated in the larger context of and research on action heroines in film and television (Yvonne Tasker, Diana Negra, Jeffrey Brown, ) but also understood within gaming conventions associated with the games of action heroines. For example, single-player video games tend to have more narrative attached and often focus on the development of a single character throughout the game as the character fights his or her way through several adventures. Within single-player games, women are most often heroines in the action, action-adventure, and survival-horror genres, consequently all genres that require the appearance of an exceptional hero. Connecting these representations to both their filmic representations as well as their specific genre conventions helps generate a
complex understanding of these heroines and the cultural function of their similarities and differences.

Another layer of complexity is negotiating current cultural attitudes towards women in general. In current society, Rosalind Gill, Angela McRobbie, and other feminist media theorists have identified current attitudes towards women as “post-feminist.” McRobbie argues "Post-feminism positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved in order to install a whole repertoire or new meanings which emphasize that it is no longer needed, it is a spent force." (McRobbie, 255). Included in the post-feminist repertoire is the emphasis on choice as a means of empowerment. Tasker and Negra point out that "Within contemporary popular culture, it is clear that certain kinds of female agency are recognizably and profitably packaged as commodities. Typically texts of this form are directed at a female audience even while covertly acknowledging male viewers/voyeurs" (Tasker and Negra, 107-108). In situating video game heroines within this post-feminist context it is necessary to understand the ways that these heroines are complicit within post-feminism, and examine why these particular representations are profitable commodities, and determine what effect this might have in constructing the female subject.

The chapters presented in this thesis try to situate the representations of heroines in matrices of genre, player reception, post-feminism, narrative, imagery, and play to present a nuanced picture of the videogame action heroine. Though not every chapter is able to address all aspects mentioned, together they work towards a comprehensive and deep understanding of the action heroine, her reception in gaming culture, and her political impact. Ultimately, the discipline of the heroine's body, normative "choices", and the sexual availability of female
Chapter 1: Does Perspective Matter?: Gender Construction through 1st and 3rd Person Perspective

This chapter looks at well-known action heroines to determine the ways in which gamers are meant to identify with these characters, examining point of view as an important technique of identification. My question is how players are supposed to identify with female characters, and whether videogames themselves, through the dynamic of play and perspective, disrupt this particular way of identification. To answer these questions, this chapter examines four video game heroines from games that require the player to use the female character; two heroines portrayed in third-person perspective and two controlled through first-person perspective.

This chapter complicates debates over whether or not videogame heroines invite transgender identification (assuming a male player) by examining how these heroines are represented through point of view. I argue that when portrayed through third-person view, heroines are portrayed as overly-sexualized versions of femininity that are often experienced in the media, there for the assumed young male player to ogle, which ultimately hinders identification. However, first-person heroines, while maintaining some traditional aspects of femininity, are better able to be represented as the subjects rather than objects of their respective games, which increases the likelihood of identification with these characters.

Chapter 2: Containment Fields: Heroines, Bodies, and Costumes

While the previous chapter examined the gaze and the heroine in videogames, this chapter focuses more explicitly on the bodily representation of the heroine, examining the purpose of excessive sexualization of heroines by analyzing the purpose of costumes in the
videogame *DC Universe Online*. Through analyzing the different bodies and costumes available in the creation of male and female characters, this chapter ultimately argues that heroine's costumes serve to locate them within patriarchy while positioning them as empowered women. This insight serves as a lens with which to understand the character creation process in general.

Character creation is a process that involves a multitude of choices, from the depth of a character's nose to the number of freckles on her face. Despite the variety and depth of choices available to customize a character, these choices ultimately tend to obscure the fact that some aspects, such as the body, often cannot be modified or can only be modified in certain ways. For instance, many character creation processes will not allow players to determine the weight of their characters, though height and bust size can often be changed. The ways in which characters *cannot* be modified present the gamer with a homogenized, idealized female body that becomes normalized across mediums. In turn this formalized body enables the heroine to cross mediums with ease, as the necessary signs to semiotically represent a woman as an action heroine are identical across film and television.

Chapter 3: Genre, Gender, and Choice: Creating Hegemony through Romance in Fantasy Video Games

While most Action RPGs allow the basic option between male and female, Bioware’s popular *Dragon Age* series and *Mass Effect* series offer players the option of pursuing sexual romance with the games. Particularly, *Dragon Age: Origins*, the first game in the series, drew considerable criticism for the availability of gay romance within the game. Whether a player’s character is male or female, they are provided three romance options, one of whom is a same-sex option. This was fairly radical and new to the gaming world in 2009, and has drawn considerable criticism; the game’s successors feature similar options. Despite the availability of pursuing a
same-sex romance within the game, I argue that the heterosexual relationships are privileged due to their coinciding with traditional fantasy norms. While these choices offer a variety of experiences to the player, the options re-create a racialized, heteronormative hegemony reminiscent of the world in which we currently live.

Looking at fan reactions to the game, it is particularly evident that some in-game choices are valued above others. In many online forums fans debate the "best" ending, putting individual game narratives in competition. In this manner these romances are demonstrative of the post-feminist idea of choice, where the ability to choose appears to offer equality. However, in reality the choices are mired in ideology and politics, and in this case, genre (which comes with its own ideological and political associations). While an individual may be able to narratively experience an alternative to heteronormative society though the game, ultimately these choices do not impact the representation of queer relationships outside the game world.

Chapter 4: The Woman Gamer Subject

The development of videogames has coincided with the emergence of the internet, a feature that has influenced the way that people interact with video games, form fandoms, and the way that videogames themselves have been produced. As with comics, the relationship between gamers and producers is more elastic than that between movie fans and producers. This has allowed gamers to influence game development, which is yet another facet of gaming to consider when looking at gender representation. One other facet is the large and extremely vocal community that self-identified gamers have created on the internet. In the past year, this community has demonstrated violent sexist tendencies, particularly when suggestions about girl gamers or female game characters have been put forth. Understanding community assumptions
about gender must be an additional lens with which to view representations of femininity in and out of game play.

This chapter moves away from explicitly analyzing representations of femininity in videogames, and instead begins to explore the ways these representations have created a discourse that has impacted the way women are understood in the gaming community. Drawing on post-structural scholarship, this chapter explores the creation of the female gaming subject through community understanding of women based in shared texts (videogames). Examining several incidents that have happened in the gaming community in the past year, it becomes apparent that although there are multiple, and at times competing discourses surrounding the woman gamer subject, the most conspicuous discourse positions women as solely available for consumption.

As a female gamer, clearly this research is personal on one level as my own experiences playing games and participating in the community have colored how I respond to many of the representations I will be examining. However, as video games are quickly becoming one of the most prominent forms of entertainment in America, there is clearly a need to address the impact of video games in current culture, specifically in regards to gender. As these characters are doubly coded, both in the culture they are created in and by the literal lines of code, they provide a clear way to both examine community attitudes and the more technical aspects of the video games themselves. By examining the formal features of video games, the representations of femininity found within, and attitudes within the gaming community the cultural coding of video games shines through revealing a series of intensely post-feminist heroines in-game that fuel misogynistic attitudes towards female gamers out of game.
CHAPTER I: GENDERED IDENTIFICATION AND PERSPECTIVE IN VIDEO GAMES

While there has been ample study of film, gender, and audience identification, there has been little research done on gender and player identification with regards to video games. Using Laura Mulvey's inaugural work as a stepping stone, this chapter will examine how players identify with female videogame characters. Adding complexity to this examination are the various points of view available in video games; most often third person and first person perspective. Notably, neither of these perspectives conforms to the traditional film gaze and both third and first person perspective are unique to video games with a few exceptions of experimental film (Brooker, 122). While both of these perspectives differ from the traditional cinematic gaze, they each conform to Mulvey's ideas, however, the added component of play in video games complicates practices of identification and objectification. Despite the presence of a distinctly male gaze in the creation of most video games, this component of play, in addition to the different perspectives present in video games, can serve to mitigate the male gaze and allow players of all genders to identify with female video game characters.

To begin this examination of perspective and playable female characters, several games and characters were selected according to specific criteria. First and foremost, the character must be the only playable character of their game, meaning that the narrative and game play must be exclusively focused on the female character. This excludes female characters in fighting games like Street Fighter IV or characters in ensemble casts like Final Fantasy XIII. The reason for this limitation is twofold: this limits the focus to games that have a narrative focus and, additionally, focusing on one character instead of many allows for a more direct examination of how the player is possibly identifying with a single character.
The second criterion involves games in which the player is forced to play as a female character. This excludes games where the player can create a character or choose one character out of several to play. The purpose of this criterion relates to the stereotypical game player. Since the majority of video game console players are assumed to be male, examining games where the (male) player only has the option to play as a female character allows for the exploration of cross-gender identification. Statistics indicate that when players are given the option to choose the gender of a character, the male option is utilized with far more frequency than the female option. For example, Bioware released some statistics for its game *Mass Effect 2* indicating that almost 80% of the players chose to use the male character while only roughly 20% chose to play as female (Tan). Exploring why players decide to choose to play as male or female would again be extremely fruitful research but would most likely require ethnographic research far beyond the scope of this chapter and again, is not the present.

Finally, the majority of characters examined originate from the action-adventure genre of video games. The action-adventure genre and the survival horror genre of games contain the largest amounts of video games featuring solo female protagonists, but games from the survival horror genre will not be included in this analysis. The primary reason for this is that there are several notable genre differences in the way these games depict women. Gender identification and the horror genre have been examined in detail by theorists such as Carol Clovar looking at film. In general this research has resulted in different conclusions regarding identification than research that has examined the action heroine. There is fruitful research ahead that might investigate the ways in which these theories correspond (or don't) to survival video games. However, since most popular female video game characters currently originate from the action adventure genre, it makes since for the purpose of this paper to limit the scope to that genre.
While the number of video games that fit these criteria is inordinately small – according to one study, only 10% of games feature a primary female character -- rather than invalidating the observations put forth in this paper, this number speaks to anxieties in the gaming industry regarding the ability for a presumed male audience to relate and identify with female characters (Williams et. al, 825). Creating female characters can be seen as risky for game developers, but the enormous popularity of the few primary female characters created speaks to the fact that players are able to form some sort of connection with these characters whether it be sexual admiration or intense identification. To represent third-person perspective, I chose Lara Croft from the *Tomb Raider* series, Bayonetta from *Bayonetta* and the upcoming *Bayonetta 2*.

Choosing female characters to represent the first-person perspective was a challenging task. The first-person perspective is most often related to the First Person Shooter genre, which primarily features male protagonists. From action games I was only able to identify two first person characters that fit the criteria: Chell from the *Portal* games and Faith from *Mirror's Edge*. This rarity can be explained by genre limitations but also relates to anxieties about forcing male players to engage with a female gaze inherent to a female protagonist portrayed through first person perspective. Due to the visual availability of female characters from third person view, I ultimately argue that characters such as Lara, Jade, and Bayonetta are overly sexualized and made available for the male gaze similar to the ways in which Mulvey details women are objectified through film. However, through the use of first-person perspective Faith and Chell deny this gaze to a certain extent in game and the games force players to look through a female gaze, though this is mitigated and contested.

Third Person Perspective
For those unfamiliar with perspective in video games, third person perspective can be described as a view that while not wholly omniscient, sees a good deal of the world while being tied to the avatar of a specific character. This view is generally focused slightly above a character's shoulder and generally positioned in back of the character. The player is able to see slightly more than the character, but this view is limited to a certain radius around the character, and often feels like one is still looking through a lens. For instance, the player is often able to move the in-game "camera" to look more intently at certain areas without the character moving on screen. However, the camera focuses on the character nearly 90% of the time. Although this differs from traditional film angles, this point of view still offers the player a mediating lens to look through which is similar to the male gaze analyzed by Laura Mulvey in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema."

For Mulvey, the gaze of the camera serves to both objectify and eroticize women while allaying castration anxiety by providing avenues for the audience to identify with the main male character, however, in games like Tomb Raider: Underworld and Bayonetta there are no male characters for the audience to identify with: both Lara Croft and Bayonetta are the sole protagonists of their games. In Lara's case, her appearance and existence as one of the first popular female characters has generate a large academic following. Many papers have debated Lara Croft's suitability as a feminist icon or mere "action babe". My focus on her lies with her visual portrayal through the third person perspective, and whether players are able to form any level of identification with her due to a lack of male characters to focus on.

A certain mythos surrounds the initial creation of Lara, related to her bust specifications. According to this myth Toby Gard, Lara Croft's creator, was tinkering with her image, and a brief slip of his mouse turned an intended 50% increase to her breast size into a 150% gain. This
image encountered instant approval from the development team before he could correct it (McLaughlin). Real or not, this anecdote provides several understandings of the atmosphere in which these female characters are created. First, the community of developers is primarily male. There are few female programmers, and few of those are currently in management positions, with one study providing that game developers are 88.5% male and 11.5 percent female, thought there are notable exceptions (Gourdin). Secondly, the community composed of self-identified gamers is predominantly male as well, though there has been an influx of female players in recent years. Taken together there is still a strong male presence within the video game community, which is typically represented as between 60-80% male (Williams et al., 831). So, similar to the film developers, the creators of games are most likely male, who gear games towards their largest audience, who also happens to be male.

For Lara Croft, this means that she has been understood in a multitude of ways. For some, Lara represents a move towards liberal feminist politics as applied to video games:

In the name of equality, men grant women access to the symbolic order predefined by men. Lara, the exceptional woman, gets to play out the role typical of a male action hero in literature, film, and video game - an intrepid explorer taming the savage (photo-real). (Thomas, 258)

The inclusion of a female character in a masculine realm is seen as an example of equality, Lara can play on par with Indiana Jones, yet this is because she is exceptional. Others have seen Lara in a similar light, claiming that she is simply a woman in male clothing made acceptable through her overt femininity (Lancaster, 88). However, despite these criticisms many critics have found that there can be no single interpretation of Lara Croft arguing that Lara can be a sex object, a positive role model, and anything imaginable in between (Mikula, 85). Taking these varied
arguments into account, Lara Croft becomes a polysemic, over determined icon to scholars and players alike. While this research is meaningful in an attempt to decode Lara Croft and her impact on society, my focus on her lies with her visual portrayal through third person perspective and whether players are able to form any level of identification with her through game play or whether her sexualized image derails identification in favor of objectification.

Lara Croft's last appearance in a Tomb Raider game was in Tomb Raider: Underworld, a game focusing on her quest to find her mother. Since it is difficult to cover the span of the Tomb Raider franchise, most of my analysis of in-game Lara is situated on this single game rather than the twelve or so games that make up the franchise. A brief look at the first two game levels sets the stage for what the player will experience for the rest of the game. Tomb Raider: Underworld begins in the middle of the game's narrative, Lara's home is on fire and the player must navigate her avatar through the vast maze of the house to see Lara to safety, dodging, jumping, climbing, and performing some aerial acrobatics to do so, in essence teaching the player the controls of the game. This brief introduction tutorial is then over, and the first real level begins, the narrative taken back in time to the beginning of the adventure.

This new location features Lara on a boat and in a swimsuit. Though the recent carnation of Lara's avatar features a bust reduction, there is no denying it is still amply displayed through her one-piece bathing suit. The inclusion of a half-open zipper at the top of her garment provides more than a hint of cleavage. To complete the level, the player must take Lara through an intricate set of underwater caves through some ancient ruins (and avoid/kill sharks), and drop a spiky chandelier on top of a giant octopus before she is trapped in the ruins and must complete the process in reverse (minus the octopus) to escape: all of which she does barefoot in a swimsuit. When that level is complete, a new loading screen interrupts the diegesis to ask the player
what outfit Lara should wear on the next leg of her adventure: shorts or pants. These first few levels are a prime example of both the game play and images the player will be presented with through the rest of *Tomb Raider: Underworld*: complex mazes that require expert maneuvering, the threat of danger from animals that Lara must kill through guns or other complex ways, and finally an eroticized image of Lara which the player can control to a certain extent through the game.

Bayonetta is similarly eroticized in her game *Bayonetta*. In the prologue of the game, we are presented with a woman dressed in a nun-like outfit, complete with cowl and bible. As the scene progresses, enemy characters arrive on scene and we finally see Bayonetta jump into action. She leaps into the air, where her enemies slash at her. Strategic slashes in her costume appear through the middle of her butt, a long slash up her thigh, one across her shoulders, and a final horizontal slash across her bust. Here, Bayonetta throws her clothes into the air, and lest we be too concerned about the lack/castration anxiety this naked image could conjure for male players, her hair quickly forms skin tight leather-esque clothes, and she quickly acquires guns, and goes through over ten sets before finally acquiring four permanently; two for her hands and two for her disco heels. This brief prologue scene features Bayonetta fetishized as a sexy nun, fragmented as her outfit is penetrated by swords, fetishized again as she licks/sucks/consumes a lollipop, and finally Bayonetta's acquisition of not one, not two, but four phallic objects. After that brief cut scene, the player obtains control of Bayonetta and is required to finish off the remainder of the enemies by controlling the use of Bayonetta and her lethal figure. Subsequent levels require the player to use increasingly difficult combinations of commands to trigger powerful attacks. As Bayonetta gets more powerful, she becomes less clothed. According to the narrative Bayonetta is a witch of sorts, and she uses her hair for many of the spells. Since her
clothing consists of nothing but her hair, as Bayonetta draws on her magic for more powerful attacks, she loses clothing, to near-complete nudity.

While it may be unclear what level of identification is going on in each game, it is clear that these games allow for a high level of what Mulvey identifies as "scopophilia," which comes from the pleasure of using a person or object as a visual sexual stimulus (Mulvey, 14). Lara Croft and Bayonetta are very attractive women designed to be ogled. The player can control the camera angle to see whatever view of Lara that s/he may want, in addition to being able to choose which clothes the player would prefer to see Lara in. Bayonetta jumps through a series of commonly fetishized images in her prologue, and loses clothing the stronger she gets. This inventive narratives device serves the sole purpose of making Bayonetta's (almost) nude body available to the player on frequent occasions throughout game play. The gaze here is in the hands of the player and they can subject Lara and Bayonetta to it at will.

Of course, it does not take a thorough textual analysis of these games to make an argument that these characters are explicitly for the scopophilic gaze. An examination of the cover art of both Tomb Raider: Underworld and Bayonetta reveals sexualized images. On the front of Tomb Raider: Underworld Lara's body is displayed with most of her head cut off, just a body to be looked at. On the front of Bayonetta, Bayonetta is shown mid-kick; a pose that manages to emphasize her chest and her butt at the same time. Surveying the box art of other games featuring a female, third-person lead, the women of Wet, X-Blade, Blades of Time, Venetica, and Heavenly Sword are depicted in similar poses in varying stages of undress on the covers of their games. These images invite the gaze, and promise the players an even greater control of it through the video game.
Yet this visual representation of the avatar, and the player's subsequent ability to control the “camera” through which these characters are viewed is just one aspect of the video game. A player must control this avatar to move from level to level in the game, when the player moves the joystick the character moves, when the player pushes a button, the character performs an action. This interaction is closer to that of child and toy rather than audience and film. A child playing with a character can make it move, decide what it is going to say and create an elaborate back story if one is not provided, it is a subject/object relationship in which the child (subject) interacts with the toy (object) and places her own subjectivity onto the object, as all the stories the object will feature in come from the subject’s mind.

I propose a similar relationship of subject/object between player and avatar. A player cannot change the appearance of Lara or Bayonetta just like a child cannot (generally speaking) change the appearance of most of her toys, but the player controls the actions of the character and can insert their own subjectivity on top of the character during game play. In this way, players may subject Lara or Bayonetta to a scopophilic gaze, while identifying with the actions of the characters as they guide them through games. The level and type of identification players experience through play are based on their own subjectivities that they bring to game play. This type of identification explains the results of Anne-Marie Scheliner's study, which found that players of the original *Tomb Raider* identified with Lara Croft in a multitude of ways.

Based on a brief email survey, Schleiner discovered that rather than one unified way of identifying with Lara, there was a wide variety of ways that players identified with Lara which ranged from Lara as a female automaton to Lara as a queer babe with a shotgun (Schleiner, 225). With each of these modes, there were varying levels of identification that the player experienced based on his or her own subjective identity which featured strongly in his or her
game play. For example, some male players identified with the victims of Lara Croft rather than the titular heroine, which suggests that the players derived masochistic pleasure from the repeated destruction of the in-game enemies (Schleiner, 224). In a different type of identification the queer female gaming subject experienced pleasure in playing Lara Croft, seeing Lara as a sexual object able to open a queer channel to pleasure through play (Schleiner, 224). These are just two examples of several ways that players have articulated the way they relate to Lara Croft.

In each of these examples, there are varying levels of identification. For the first group, they identify not with Lara, but with her victims possibly deriving masochistic pleasure as Lara destroys these victims one by one. The second group, the queer female gaming subject, identifies with Lara explicitly, taking pleasure from the blurring of boundaries and the "abject annihilation of her foes" (Schleiner, 224). Both groups bring their subjectivity into the game as they interact and identify (or not) with a female protagonist. What allows these varied types of identification are the varied mechanics of video games. Visually, Lara and Bayonetta can serve as male pleasure objects while compensating with toughness and guns to allay castration anxiety, while through this same subject/object relationship between the player and character, players can experience different levels of identification with the game.

This identification process does not follow the same model as Mulvey's process which "demands identification of the ego with the object on the screen through the spectator's fascination and recognition of his like." (Mulvey, 10). In games that feature only a female protagonist, there is often no recognition of "a like other" when considering that the audience of these games is predominantly male, and that the level of beauty available to a digital creation is out of reach for female players. Instead, there is a dual process where the player engages the scopophilic gaze and objectifies the sexualized female image of characters like Lara Croft and
Bayonetta, and then the player overlays his or her own subjectivity onto the object as he or she controls it. The player's specific subjectivity determines the extent to which there is identification with the character's actions even while the player objectifies the character's image. In this way, third--person perspective can allow for greater objectification than the cinematic gaze by allowing players direct access (though there are pre-determined limits) to the camera, while the act of playing and directing the character's movements allows for complex process of identification stemming from the player's own subjectivity.

First Person Perspective

If third-person point of view is defined by an omniscient-like quality to control the camera gaze; first-person perspective denies this gaze to a player. Instead of controlling the gaze, the player is forced to control the character, to view the game world through the eyes of the character he/she is playing, forcing the player in a sense to become the character. Though there are times in films when a perspective like this is used, it is often in horror movies or independent movies to either mask identify, force sympathy, make a movie more realistic in found-footage films, or as an artistic angle in independent films. In video games, this view is most often found in the first-person shooter (FPS) game, such as Call of Duty or Killzone.

This denial of the gaze means that female characters in first-person perspective are often much less sexualized than their third-person counterparts. Both Chell and Faith are far less sexualized than Lara and Bayonetta. Each wears a tank top, which fully covers their midriff, and baggy pants that offer no definition of any interesting parts, a huge change from bathing suits, bare midriffs, and general nudity that is often depicted in games feature a female character in third-person perspective. However, it also means that the player is unable to fully see this character on screen. This allows for two possibilities, namely that a player might immerse herself
in the identity of the character, or instead that the player again overlays her own identify over that of the character, the character gaze becoming the player gaze.

One method of establishing the ways that players identify with game characters is through what Jeff Rush terms an "embodied metaphor" which happens when a player overcomes an aporia, or roadblock, inside the game. This aporia can be defined as a moment where the connection between avatar and player is disrupted. The player controls the avatar, but it does not do quite as the player wants, or does exactly as directed but still does not meet the end goals of the player (Rush, 252). This moment where control is lost, or does not fulfill the end goals facilitates a moment where the player surfaces from game immersion, and realizes the limits of the on-screen universe.

The aporia, which causes a rupture that forces the player to realize his distance from the character, results in an embodied metaphor, resulting in a momentary break between player and character that allows the player to realize his connection to the character. However it is unclear in this model whether this embodied metaphor leads to increased player identification with the character, or rather forces a realization that the player and character are not one. Moving beyond the embodied metaphor, I argue that the aporia is just one of many that contains the potentiality for player identification with the character. These events, which I call mediated mirror moments, occur when the player is confronted with an in-game rupture that forces the player to re-imagine the relationship between himself and the character onscreen. For instance, a mediated mirror moment could be the first time the player sees the image of the avatar in-game, or a cut scene that switches from first-person view to allow the player to take in a cinematic view of the character. In these moments, the screen serves as a mirror, allowing the player to engage in a mediated version of Lacan's mirror phase.
The mirror phases occurs when a child first takes joy in recognizing himself in the mirror due to a misconception that his mirror image is more complete than his own bodily experiences, which is both a recognition/misrecognition necessary for the first articulation of subjectivity (Mulvey, 10). Like a child cannot see his body in full without the help of a mirror, in first-person games, there is little opportunity to see the character from face on, or the whole of the body rather than just the parts (arms, legs). This provides little opportunity for the character to be developed as character, instead this allows for the player to envision himself as the character rather than identifying with the avatar. However, like a mirror, most of these games provide opportunities for the player to see the character in full. These reflection moments, disrupt the process of seeing avatar as self, the player sees the whole of the character for the first time and realizes that that image is not his own, but the character whom he has become. There is a recognition of the avatar as character, and a misrecognition that the character is more complete than the player's bodily experiences and identifying that character with the "I" of self which moves the player from identifying self with avatar to identifying avatar as self.

However, this works to varying degrees based on the degree of development the character receives in game, it is hard to identify with a shell. *Mirror's Edge* and the *Portal* series each employ tactics to develop Faith and Chell. Much of Chell's background is unknown, prior to her awakening in the "Enrichment Center": the player is given no background story, and she is in essence a blank slate, who the player doesn't realize is female until the reflection moment when the player catches Chell's image in a portal. Much of Chell's character development is derived from outside characters talking to her. In the first game, this consists of GLaDOS, the female voiced AI in charge of the facility, making snide comments in an attempt at emotional
manipulation for example, when the player manages to guide Chell to confront GLaDOS, she says

> Well, you found me. Congratulations. Was it worth it? Because despite your violent behavior, the only thing you've managed to break so far... is my heart.

> Maybe you could settle for that, and we'll just call it a day. I guess we both know that isn't going to happen.

In *Portal 2* where Chell's gender has been already established, many of the comments that both GLaDOS and Wheatley (a male-voiced AI) make specifically relate to Chell's gender. GLaDOS insinuates that Chell is fat, and Wheatley tries to bribe Chell with designer bags and boy bands to try to manipulate Chell to do his will. Outside of similar comments, very little is known about Chell and her life, with game players generally disliking her. Chell then, is not developed enough to initiate player identification with her. Looking at polls asking for player's favorite *Portal* characters, I found that Chell often had the least amount of votes, often behind objects like turrets. For example, the game news site *The Escapist* offered a poll for users to choose their favorite *Portal 2* characters. and Chell did not make it onto the poll list ("Poll: Your Favourite Portal 2 Character"). This means that the main character of the videogame was not even offered as a choice to be a fan favorite. The general player consensus is that Chell is just a shell, and there is little data to suggest otherwise. She represents a failed identification. Players see her and acknowledge her existence, but are unable to identify with a blank character. Instead, players move past the reflection moment and continue placing their "self" onto the avatar instead of taking Chell's self into their own.

*Mirror's Edge* uses two methods to establish Faith as a complex character, combining with the extensive use of cut scenes (cinematic scenes which the player is unable to control) to
forward the game's narrative, and the use of reflective surfaces to display Faith in the levels. This dual approach develops Faith narratively, giving the players cinematic scenes to further their understanding of Faith's character and story, and reaffirms Faith's identity as the character by providing multiple surfaces where the player can see Faith's reflection. However, cut scenes are particularly interesting in that they represent a brief movie experience while in-game. These scenes offer the possibility of re-establishing Faith through the male gaze, as the player begins to see her through a camera lens. Despite the fact that there is the possibility of recuperating Faith into the male gaze, in general, this combination of cut scenes, where Faith is fleshed out as a character, the constant reaffirmation that a player is playing as Faith, and not as themselves through the use of mirrors, there is the potential for the player to recognize Faith as a subject in her own right, and potentially move towards identification with her during each occurrence.

While reflection moments disrupt the game flow and force the player to re-evaluate the player/character dynamic with each occurrence through the recognition/misrecognition of the mirror image, it does not guarantee player identification with the character, only stimulates conditions needed for that identification. Players can recognize the image of the character as they see Chell through a portal or Faith's reflection in a mirror without necessarily misrecognizing it as the more complete identity that the player must associate with. While games like *Portal* and *Mirror's Edge* force a player to view the world through the eyes of a woman, this does not necessarily mean that the player identifies with that woman, however, it allows for the potentiality of this type of identification.

**Conclusion**

Both first-person perspective and third-person perspective video games with female protagonists provide different means of identification with their characters. Third person
perspective most closely mimics the traditional film gaze, allowing players to objectify the character through direct control of the in-game camera. In addition to being able to control the camera, the player controls the character which leads to the potential for identification as the player identifies with the actions that he and the character are performing simultaneously, and allows for a subject/object relationship similar to that of child and toy where the player's level of identification with the character is dependent on the player's own subjectivity.

First person perspective, on the other hand, denies the objectifying gaze that is so prevalent when looking at characters like Lara Croft and Bayonetta from third person games. Female protagonists in first person games are often less sexualized which can be viewed as an effect of the negation of the gaze. Playing through the eyes of another character also allows for unique reflection moments when the play is momentarily disrupted by the sight of the whole character, rather than just the parts, is seen through cut scenes, portal, or mirror of sorts. These reflection moments trigger a transition into a Lacanian mirror phase, where the player recognizes the avatar as something outside of self, and potentially misrecognizes that avatar as greater than the self the player had previously been experiencing.

However, in both first-person and third-person games, there is a potential for rejection of identification, and a potential for identification in ways not mentioned in this chapter. The combination of visual medium with interactive elements allows for a new assortment of identification strategies similar and different to those identified in film theory. More research needs to be done in this area to understand the nature of identification in video games, and the subversive potential of forcing cross-gender identification in games featuring a sole female protagonist. Currently, though, there is just potential in these games. Each of the previously mentioned identification techniques rely on the interaction of the player's subjectivity with the
in-game avatar, which ultimately means there is no single way of identifying with these characters, and identification in first- and third- person games is open to a myriad of player interpretations.

Point of view clearly mediates the ways in which players engage with heroines, however this chapter has only addressed how representation operates with pre-defined characters. The next chapter will begin to look at the ways in which costuming functions to shackle the heroine to patriarchal norms while masking her masculine traits in games where the player is asked to design their own character. Despite the proliferation of hundreds of choices ranging from attire, hair color, hair style, eye color, chin width, etc., these character creation programs function, in conjunction with point of view, to reify the image of the heroine and limit her to a single, sexualized body type.
CHAPTER II: CONTAINMENT FIELDS: HEROINES, BODIES, AND COSTUMES

There is little room for argument that costumes represent an integral part of the creation of the superhero. They serve as distinct markers to society, signaling membership in the superhero community while also serving as individual markers speaking to a hero's origins and powers. The donning of the costume becomes the single most important step of the superhero's becoming, which we see re-iterated through movies and comics. In both the 2002 Spiderman and the 2011 The Amazing Spiderman we see Peter Parker (Tobey McGuire and Andrew Garfield respectively) sketching suit designs and then later hand-sewing the final product. In the recent 2007 White Tiger by Tamora Pierce, we see Spiderman admonishing the new White Tiger, Angela del Toro, on the fact that she has not yet adopted a costume. He later accompanies her, along with Black Widow, on a shopping spree to determine the White Tiger's new look. Even with texts that are not explicitly tied to established superheroes pay special attention to costuming. For instance, in The Incredibles (2004) obtaining new family costumes signals their changing identities, acceptance of their heroic roles, and cohesion as a family unit.

Despite the fact that the costume may be the single-most important component of a superhero identity, there has been little research to more fully explain the phenomenon satisfactorily. In his book Superheroes: A Modern Mythology Richard Reynolds begins to explain the symbolism of capes. He argues that superhero costumes constitute a system of langue and parole, and that within the established langue a large variety of costumes appear. As a side note he adds that "Superheroine's tend to reveal a lot more bare flesh than their male colleagues, but costume color and details vary across the borders of both sexes" (Reynolds, 26). This sidenote is interesting in the way that it notices the relation of costume to body, as the relationship between flesh and costume is essential to understanding a costume's function.
The idea that a superhero is intimately tied to his costume has been taken up by other scholars. As Vicki Karaminas points out, "superheroes are dressed bodies; dress transforms the body and appropriates it for specific contexts, endowing superhero psyche with attributes and energies that are beyond the 'natural' world" (Karaminas, 505). It is the costume then that reveals the super body hidden in the civilian clothes of a Clark Kent or Peter Parker. What their street clothes don't reveal or explicitly attempt to hide, the costume reveals, turning them into masculine spectacles. Scott Bukatman has written that for superheroes "the look of power, virility, prowess, counts for more than function and has more in common with the world of modeling, beauty contests, or cinema idols than that of sports heroes" (Bukatman, 59). In essence the costume provides the superhero with masculine power by revealing the body, giving the superhero the necessary look of power. Other theorists have likened this transformation of normal person to superhero to the armoring of knights or the war paint used by various cultures across time (Weltzien, 243). A warrior must look intimidating and masculine in order to be perceived as a threat.

If the superhero costume works to endow our heroes with masculinity by putting the body and its exploits on display, what then is the purpose of the super heroine's costume? As Reynolds mentioned previously (and any purveyor of comics will be familiar with), the super heroine costume contrasts significantly with that of the superhero in terms of the amount of flesh on display. In fact, the general appearance of the female body in superhero comics has led Bukatman to proclaim, "The spectacle of the female body in these titles is so insistent, and the fetishism of breasts, thighs, and hair is so complete, that the comics seem to dare you to say something about them that isn't redundant" (Bukatman, 65). Perhaps it is this dare that has kept scholars from looking too closely at the female costumed body. After all, the bodies are so
exaggerated, so impossible, that one is left to wonder if these portrayals serve any purpose other than as a fulfillment of male fantasy. Following Brown's argument in *Dangerous Curves* I argue that the super heroine costume serves to shackle the super heroine's power by rendering her as sexual spectacle to obscure her masculine traits and to subject her to the rules of the patriarchal superhero order.

Creating the Body in DC Universe Online

To further emphasize the importance of costumes to the superhero, the video game *DC Universe Online* (*DCUO*) includes massive costume customization through the games character creation process. *DCUO* is a massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) developed by Sony Online Entertainment and co-published by Sony Computer Entertainment and WB Games. Following on the heels of two other superhero MMORPGs, *Champions Online* and *City of Heroes*, *DCUO* grants its players the ability go create and play as their own superhero. It differed from the previous games in that *DCUO* allows players to engage the fictional universe of DC Comics, neither *Champions Online* or *City of Heroes* had any agreements with comics companies for the licensing of their superheroes. This large difference allows players to engage with previously established comic characters of the DC universe, and the close partnership between D.C Comics and *DCUO* make it a key text for deciphering superhero conventions, and understanding how comics police these.

The character creation process specifically is of key importance to this paper. This process boils down becoming a superhero into ten easy steps, with many steps highlighting the importance of the body and costume. For those unfamiliar with character creation, it is a feature of many video games that allows a player to completely customize their character from looks to combat skills. *DCUO* boils down creating a superhero into ten easy steps, each step accompanied
with pictures of all available options. The first step in the character creation process is to choose your sex, male or female, and option that is accompanied by a note that "combat skills are not affected by gender." This note accompanies several steps of the character creation process and serves to enforce the idea that much of the appearance of the superhero is tied to getting the best look, creating the optimal spectacle.

Step two asks the player to choose a build for their character. Originally, when the game was first released the builds came in only three sizes, small, medium and large. For the male character, the large build manifests as an extremely muscular body, similar to those of body builders or characters like the Thing or Hulk. The medium size remained intensely muscular, but less bulky. Batman from *Batman: The Animated Series* or Ryan Reynolds's recent role as the Green Lantern serve as examples of this type of build. Finally, the small category was still musculearly defined, but still much skinnier than the medium size, reminiscent of heroes like Spiderman. These categories were later re-named to brute, striker, and spark respectively, and within each category the player was given the option of three height options, tall, medium or short.

While the three male builds were all easily distinguishable from each other on the basis of musculature, the female builds feature no muscle and are only minimally distinguishable from each other by cup size. The large and medium are very nearly identical, tall, narrow-waisted, and big breasted, although the mesa appears to possess slightly larger breasts, while the small is the most distinguishable due to the significant decrease of bust into almost realistic proportions. This lack of differentiation between the different female builds implies that there is a singular hyperfeminine version of the acceptable female body in mainstream comics. This body can be defined as having little to no muscles (if muscles are present they are toned and not bulging),
sleek lines, narrow waist, and a large bust. This exaggerated body, which the costumes reveals, defines the acceptable "look" for a super heroine. While the three male builds also serve as examples of hyper masculinity, there is at least some variance and plasticity involved in what builds the costume may reveal for men. This step in the creation process quickly limits the types of bodies allowed entry in the DC universe, particularly in regards to the female body.

It should be noted here that many players of DCUO have criticized the game for its limiting character process. For instance, one common critique was that there was no way to further customize the superhero bodies. For instance, in other games there is often an option to customize height and weight, allowing characters to have some rather ridiculous dimensions at times (for instance, if height is minimized and weight is maximized, or vice versa). Both Champions Online and City of Heroes included this option in their superhero creation process. However, as previously noted, neither of these games was tied directly to a comics company. When Jim Lee, current Co-Publisher and then Executive Creative Director for DCUO was asked in an interview what the main difference was between DCUO and previous games, he said "I think the main difference is we're in the DC universe...there's just nothing that compares to it, short of the Marvel universe" (Berghammer, 3). I believe this emphasis on the association with the DC universe is in part responsible for the limiting of these options. The limitations function to allow DC to preserve the company's ideal version of male and female superheroes. It was all well and good for Champions Online and City of Heroes to allow all shapes and size in their super hero inspired worlds, but in a world directly associated with the DC universe and its heroes, bodies must fit in to this pre-established world, and the limited options in character creation are one way to regulate bodies in the DCUO in-game universe.
The next step of the character creation process allows a player to choose an already established hero from the DC universe to emulate. If a player chooses to do this, the only other necessary step is to choose a name for the hero. This option is most interesting in the fact that it comes after the gender option, which allows characters to choose a male character and build, and then model their costume off of Wonder Woman for instance, or choose a female character and build and base their costume off Batman. While this option may seem to offer a bit of gender play, the only items of a costume that get transferred in a super hero or heroine inspired costume tend to be the colors of the costume, especially in cases where a player chooses a male character and build and uses a super heroine inspired costume. For instance, the Wonder Woman inspired costume available for male characters transposes the colors of Wonder Woman, without imposing the bustier and spandex underwear of the Wonder Woman costume. Most of the "inspired by" costumes simply translate a hero or heroine's colors into a gender acceptable costume, so the superman inspired costume for the female character involves the red, yellow, and blue of the superman costume with a boob window that is often a part of female superhero costumes.

This brings us to the question of what are gender acceptable costumes? In DCUO this is most easily discernible when looking at gender specific costume options, and when looking at options that are called the same name, but differ significantly in presentation. The costume design process of DCUO is split into different body and gear. Under the body option a player may choose the skin and hair of the character. While the skin options for male and female builds are identical, the number and variety of hair options for male and female builds vastly differ. The first difference is the number available to male and female builds. There are over one hundred hair styles available to male builds while there are only twenty hair styles available for the
female build. This could at first be explainable by the fact that female hair styles have been notoriously difficult for creators to program. Animating flowing locks of hair is something that game creators are still working on. That might be the problem if there weren't so many long-locked hair styles for the male builds. Instead, I would argue that the limiting of female hair styles is another factor in the continued regulation of the female body.

Another interesting difference is the name of the hair styles. The majority of female hair styles are descriptive, for instance there's the bob, shoulder-length, afro, wavy, and braided. Male styles, instead of being mainly descriptive, are called by stereotypically masculine jobs or roles on which the hair style seems to be based, like el capitan, magistrate, patriarch, contender, editor-in-chief, or drill sergeant. The only instance I found of this for women was the hair style called the school girl. As Bukatman mentioned before, hair is one of the items that is frequently fetishized for super heroines, and having the schoolgirl be the one "feminine" role that a hairstyle is based on seems to further point towards this fetishization. This also points yet again to the singular bodies and roles that super heroines become relegated to. Whereas the male build has body variations, and the hair styles fulfills multiple masculine roles, the female build is relegated to a single body with minimal variations, and only the role of the schoolgirl to aspire to.

The gendered nature of costuming further comes into view when looking at the options under "gear" which is split into head, face, emblem, chest, back, hands, waist, legs and feet. As one might except, there are few or no differences in the face, emblem, back, hands, waist, and feet category. The areas with the most difference correspond to the areas that Bukatman previously identified as overly fetishized, the breasts and thighs, or in DCUO categories, the chest, legs and feet. Together, the female specific leg and feet option serve to draw eyes to the upper thigh. For example some of the female specific footwear is heeled, thigh high, and knee
high. For leg wear, female specific options include a one-piece (think bikini bottom), opera skirt, reverse slimline (a variation of the one-piece) and the wall street which is basically a miniskirt.

The majority of these options serve to emphasize femininity and draw attention to certain body parts. However, the chest options display an increased level of fetishization. The chest options for male and female characters do this by making similarly named costume pieces look very different on male and female builds. For instance, the "formal" chest piece for the male build features a suit jacket and white tuxedo shirt that covers all skin, whereas the same piece on the female build takes the form of a chest and back revealing halter top. Many of the options that are available to both male and female builds function in this way, covering skin on the male figure while utilizing plunging necklines to reveal skin on the female build. Female build specific options function in a similar way. The "one piece" chest option is a basic bustier, and the "power" option a variation of the one piece. Another example would be the "sports bra" option, which barely covers the bust and reveals a completely midriff.

Drawn together, the female only chest, leg, and feet options add a layer of expectations to the super heroine body. First of all, the body must maintain a barbie-esque figure, which must be adorned with a costume that displays this figure publicly, calling attention to the ideal hyper feminine figure. Simply looking at the costumed body itself one is presented with a fantasy, a feminine ideal that could only be realized in an imaginary universe where people frequently defy laws of gravity. Examining the body and costume alone, it is apparent that the costume serves to enhance the feminine "look" of the super heroine to degrees unknown to the civilian side of the heroine. Yet the body and costume themselves only provide a partial explanation of themselves. Clearly, bound together they provide the right "look" for the super heroine, but that is still only
on the level of image. It is when an analysis of this image is combined with the narrative aspects of the super heroine that the purpose of the costume can truly be understood.

**Wonder Woman: Lasso, Boots, and Bustier**

To look at the narrative aspects of the costume, this paper will focus on the character of Wonder Woman. In the DC universe, Wonder Woman is the second most powerful superhero, second to Superman, which makes her the most powerful super heroine in that universe. In general, she is regarded as one part of the holy DC comic trinity which is composed of herself, Batman and Superman. As one of the earliest, and now longest published, super heroines, Wonder Woman and her costume set the standard for many super heroine's costumes of today. For this reason, Wonder Woman's narrative and costume are particularly apt for analysis, as she can be read as the urtext from which all (mostly) super heroines have sprung.

As Wonder Woman has been around since the 1940's, her original narrative has been tampered with, wiped out, and re-written multiple times. Her costume has also gone through multiple variations as well, often coinciding with historical events and strange narrative arcs. Once in the 70's Wonder Woman lost her powers and wore a white pantsuit for a time. For clarity and coherence, this analysis will stick to analyzing her most recent origin story and current costume prior to DC's recent reboot. This reboot is currently in infancy, and much of Wonder Woman's origin has not been told in her current version.

Wonder Woman hails from the island of Themyscira, the home of the ancient Amazonians. She is the daughter of Hippolyta, the leader of the Amazons, and was blessed by the gods with powers beyond those of normal Amazons. She is blessed with superhuman strength, superhuman speed, a bit of invulnerability, flight, enhanced healing, beauty, and occasionally other powers that get invented as a story demands them. Finally her name, Diana,
comes from an American fighter pilot who crash lands on Themyscira during a great war, and helps save the Amazons from an invading army. The story of the crashed pilot is also used to explain the colors of Wonder Woman's costume, which were borrowed from the original Diana's uniform. On Themyscira, Hippolyta decides that it is time the Amazon's sent an emissary to Patriarch's world (earth) on a mission of peace, so that the people of earth could benefit from the Amazon's vast wisdom. A tournament was set up, to test the strength and wisdom of all the Amazons. Blessed by the gods, Diana won easily and took on the mantle of Wonder Woman and traveled to earth.

One of the first major critiques of Wonder Woman came from Dr. Frederick Wertham, the notorious author of *Seduction of the Innocent*. As Mike Madrid notes in his book *Supergirls*, Wertham had multiple critiques of Wonder Woman, primarily that

She is physically very powerful, tortures men, has her own female following, is the cruel, 'phallic' woman. While she is a frightening figure for boys, she is an undesirable ideal for girls, being the exact opposite of what girls are supposed to be. (Qtd. in Madrid, 190).

As her power was only second to that of Superman's there was fear that Wonder Woman was too powerful.

This has a parallel to the reception of female body builders and wrestlers. In one chapter of *Action Chicks*, Dawn Heinecken writes that Chyna, the first female wrestler in the WWF, threatened to rupture the gender norms that were firmly in place in the world of wrestling. Her bulging muscles and strong body served as a threat, symbolic and real, to the male order of wrestling. In addition to her threat, people often perceived her as inhuman, and questioned her sex frequently. Heinecken argues that Chyna's threat was maintained by both her breasts implants, which were not only "visible signs of her femininity" and her costuming in the ring,
which was "tied to the image of the dominatrix, a figure drawn from male pornography" (Heinecken, 192, 198). Thus Chyna's threat was minimized and managed by turning her into a sexual object to be consumed through enhanced breasts, and minimal yet fetishized attire.

Wonder Woman's costume has functioned in a similar way, changing over the years to address various cultural anxieties. At times she has worn a toga, full armor, skirts, pants, and shorts as she has changed over time. Other appearances of Amazon women have functioned in a similar vein. As Rikke Schubart points out in *Super Bitches and Action Babes*,

In the popular American cinema, the Amazon costume is no longer Greek but combines Western lingerie with various styles of "tough" male, or adventurous clothing signaling to the audience that this is an Amazon in a man's world. (Schubart, 224)

Wonder Woman's costume performs in a similar way, the donning of her costume, signals to readers that Wonder Woman is an Amazon in a man's world, which is made explicitly clear through references to earth as Patriarch's world. The costume also signals Wonder Woman's admission into a the symbolic male order of superheroes, as previously mentioned superhero costumes can be understood as a uniform, signaling membership in the collective of superheroes. Finally, the costume can be understood as containing Wonder Woman's power, as it emphasizes her breasts and makes her a sexual object of consumption. In essence, Wonder Woman's costume turns her from might Amazon, into a subservient Valkyrie.

Lest we completely damn the costume of the super heroine, it should be noted that it can also be understood as a marker of power. The costume is a marker of membership, and the idea of the super hero or heroine is directly related to power, particularly masculine power. As the second most powerful hero in the DC universe, Wonder Woman's costume is also a symbol of her power, which through her massive strength and nigh invulnerability can be coded as
masculine. So while her costume serves as a sign of Wonder Woman's submission to the patriarchy of super heroes a sign of containment, it paradoxically openly declares Wonder Woman's power, the same power that the costume is meant to contain through excessive sexualization and spectacle. Mired within this contradiction, it is no wonder that Wonder Woman has undergone so many narrative and costume changes as authors and artists have attempted to negotiate this anxiety. So, while DCUO demonstrates the ideal female super heroine body and costume, a closer look at Wonder Woman reveals which aspects of super heroines, namely their masculine power, necessitates a hyper feminized body which the costume reveals and fetishizes.

Black Orchid: Super heroine Unmasked

As the costume is a necessary item to be considered a superhero, there are not often opportunities to see how super heroines might be portrayed sans costume, and therefore sans patriarchal authority. However, Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean's 1993 rendition of Black Orchid allows us to see a brief glimpse of an un-costumed heroine. Prior to Gaiman and McKean's three part mini-series, Black Orchid wore a pin-k costume, with a petal-esque cape, with two larger petals emerging out of the mask, this black Orchid was named Susan Linden-Thorne. In the McKean and Gaiman version, we meet Susan Linden-Thorne posing as a secretary in a business boardroom where she is hot on the case of a criminal scheme. As the meeting adjourns, her boss orders her bound, and rips off a rubber mask to reveal the Black Orchid's costumed visage underneath. This Black Orchid is unceremoniously killed, rejecting common comic tropes of long villain speeches and miraculous escapes.

Susan Linden-Thorne's death flames quickly segue into the awakening of the next Black Orchid, who the reader sees emerging from a flower-like purple pod. She emerges, naked and purple, and confused, wondering why she has awakened, and why she has awakened to violent
imagery. It is quickly explained that the previous Susan Linden-Thorne was a plant-human hybrid made forged between the original Susan Linden's DNA and plant DNA. When Susan Linden-Thorne dies, her sister-clone awakens, with partial memories of both Susan Linden and Susan Linden-Thorne. Julia Round is quick to point out that the collectivity of the sister-clones is in stark contrast to the stereotypical superhero myth, as "the superhero myth has a manifest content of heroic individualism. This is instantly overturned by Black Orchid's non-egoistic collectivism and the Orchid's confused, multiple identity" (Round, 5). This collectivity vs. individualism can be further understood by the lack of costume of the newly awakened Black Orchid. As the superhero costume has served as a marker of individualism, the new Black Orchid's lack of costume serves to underscore her similarity with her sister-clones, reinforcing the collectivity and sameness between them, which allows Black Orchid to understand herself in terms of a multiple identity.

Her lack of costume also brings her nakedness into focus. The Black Orchid remains naked for the duration of the three part series, yet in an un-eroticized depiction. The Black Orchid's body does not adhere to super heroine standards, her breasts are small and her legs are not long or particularly defined. This stands in contrast to the costumed Susan Linden-Thorne Black Orchid, where her costume revealed a perfectly large-breasted and well defined body. Without the costume, the eroticization evaporates and we are left with a female body, which while still following the body standards of society, fails to adhere to the fantastical standards of the super heroine body.

The fact that a costume is more erotic than a naked body finds another example in superheroine photom manipulations. Jeffrey Brown argues that "by layering a super heroine costume over a nude centerfold, these photom manipulations foreground the erotic link between the active
and passive fetishizations of action heroines" (Brown, 242). He goes on to argue that these photomaneuvers consolidate the active and passive woman in a single image. However, when looking at these photomaneuvers in relation to the nudity of Black Orchid, it is possible to interpret them in a different way. Like the addition of the costume to the Black Orchid, the addition of the costume to the nude centerfold serves to further eroticize that image, and place it under further male control. Without the costume, there is a possibility that the female power is not contained, rendering the naked woman into a menacing rather than erotic image.

The Black Orchid continues to fight comic norms by refusing to engage in violence. While Wonder Woman's missions to Patriarch's world brought with it a message of peace on earth, she repeatedly engages in acts of violence and fights off costumed villainy. The Black Orchid refuses to do so, even to the point of saving the original Susan Linden's (whose memories the Black Orchid shares) ex-husband, rapist, and killer. By the end of the series, the Black Orchid stands before three men, her would-be captors/killers, and says "No. I'm not coming with you. Suzy isn't coming either. Do what you have to do". In response to this pacifist statement, the men hand over their guns and leave, ostensibly never to bother her, or Suzy her sister-clone-daughter again. Without a costume then, Black Orchid does not have to engage in masculine violence to thwart her foes, instead she relies on feminine ideas of peace and persuasion.

Ultimately then, this uncostumed heroine supplants the costumed heroine's masculine power, fetishized body, and individual identity with feminine power, an un-fettered female body that relies on feminine power.

The Gaiman and McKean rendition then comes close to presenting the Black Orchid as a powerful yet essentialized female figure in the mould of mother earth. Yet this unbounded female power is quickly bounded in the recent portrayals of the Black Orchid. In the Vertigo

Black Orchid series that ran from 1993 to 1995, Flora Black, the Black Orchid featured in Gaiman and McKean's series, quickly becomes a mind controlling villain who eventually dies at the end of the series. Suzy (the child black orchid from the Gaiman and McKean run, now matured) then dons the original Black Orchid costume, and begins a life of crime fighting. She is most recently featured in The Justice League Dark issue 9, alongside Doctor Mist and John Constantine. The rapidity with which Flora Black was killed off, and Suzy Linden was bounded by a costume speaks to continued anxieties about unbounded female power. Placing Suzy Linden into the Black Orchid costume restores her to the masculine order. So while the super heroine costume performs many functions, perhaps most of all, it serves to control female and feminine power by imbuing super heroines with masculine power and containing that through fetishization.

Formalizing Features: Costumes beyond Superheroes

This argument can in turn be applied to the action heroine in video games and film, whose costuming often mimics that of the female superhero. Both female superheroes in comics and video game heroines are figures that are virtually configured, allowing for figures and costumes that defy the laws of physics. Their similarity can further be seen in the ways that these video game heroines frequently traverse mediums, to and from comic books and movies - with more success and frequency than male video game characters. Originating in Tomb Raider in 1990, Lara Croft has become a hit in both movies and comics. The role of Lara Croft was played by Angelina Jolie in the movies Lara Croft: Tomb Raider in 2001 and Lara Croft Tomb Raider: Cradle of Life in 2003. Lara (not Angelina) has also enjoyed a long run of comics, with over fifty issues printed, as well as been a frequent guest in the Witchblade comics (another female heroine that has enjoyed cross-medium success in comics, live action television, and anime).
The character BloodRayne (2002) from the *BloodRayne* video games reflects a similar trajectory. Bloodrayne has been featured in three films, *BloodRayne* (2005), *BloodRayne 2: Deliverance* (2007), and *BloodRayne: The Third Reich* (2010). She has also appeared in twenty-three issues of comic one-shots and miniseries. While not all video game heroines experience the popularity that Lara and BloodRayne have across various visual media, many have enjoyed single-issue comics dedicated to their game's release. Two other popular heroines, Joanna Dark of *Perfect Dark* and *Perfect Dark: Zero*, Faith from *Mirror's Edge*, both had comics released in preparation for their games.

The ease with which these heroines migrate between mediums is in large part due to the mostly unified way in which action heroines are presented in videogames, film, and comics. As demonstrated above, despite the vast choices offered through some video games, these options represent a normalized image of the female body. An example of this body can be seen in the figure of Fem Shep, a character from the *Mass Effect* video games. Fem Shep (female Shepherd) is the female version of Commander Shepherd, the protagonist of the series. Before the launch of *Mass Effect 3* in March, 2012, Bioware, the company that produces *Mass Effect* ran a poll on its facebook page for players to vote on the official image of Fem Shep. However, the images all possessed the exact same body with differences only in facial expression, skin color, and hair color. The final image that won with over thirty thousand votes, was an image of Fem Shep with white skin and blonde hair, later changed to red.

While both the blonde and red hair combined with extremely white skin speaks to a racialized norm, the choices available appear to offer some customization, but only for Fem Shep's face. The body in each of the six images is identical, - only the face, hair style, and hair and skin color changes. The same could be said for the video game action heroine in general who
is primarily presented with a slim, toned, sexually attractive body similar in size and shape to the three "different" female body types available in DCUO. Each action heroine is cosmetically different, yet fundamentally the same body. Lara Croft, BloodRayne, Joana Dark and others though visually distinct, display a reified image of the action heroine's body.

The body continues to play an important part of video games as the majority of video game heroines traversing mediums appear in third-person perspective. As discussed in Chapter 1, this point of view allows the player a full view of the game character, and is very easily translated to comics and film in a way that first person point of view is not. This objectifying gaze, in conjunction with costuming conventions, allows the action heroine to travel with easy to many formats.

As previously noted, comic book superheroines typically wear spandex costumes that emphasize busts, legs, and butts. Though there is typically less latex involved in film, women are similarly costumed in film and video games with clothing revealing and/or fetishizing certain body parts. Prominent video game heroines, Lara Croft from the Tomb Raider series, Bayonetta from Bayonetta, Samus Aran from Metroid other M, Bloodrayne from the Bloodrayne series, Nariko from Heavenly Sword and Joanna Dark from the Perfect Dark games to name just a few, each have fetishized body parts. Some of these games even employ "boob physics," which are engines coded to allow breasts to jiggle while a heroine is in combat (though sometimes glitches occur and the breasts will continue to jiggle as the character is standing still).

Conversely, some scholars have noted the ease with which live-action heroines have become game characters. In his chapter "Sexy Cyborgs, Game Girls, and Digital Babes" Jeffrey Brown points out that "Live-action heroines from series including Xena: Warrior Princess, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Alias, and Dark Angel... have all spun-off into best-selling games" (Brown,
Though the era and type of clothing worn by these heroines differs, it is consistently formulaic in presenting the viewer with attractive yet deadly female character. Like the superheroine's costume, this serves to both empower the character, while containing them in patriarchal culture by sexually objectifying the body. The ways in which these heroines move with ease through mediums speaks to the simplicity of the action heroine mythos. While there is a variety in the types of male bodies that we see represented as heroic - they can be small, large, muscular, lean, scrawny, brawny, old or young, etc., these depictions of heroines ultimately normalize a single body type for heroic, physically empowered women. These depictions of action heroines may offer a variety of heroines to aspire to be like, but ultimately only one body type to aspire to emulate, echoing and reinforcing the type of female body depicted outside the genre.
CHAPTER III: GENRE, GENDER AND CHOICE: CREATING HEGEMONY THROUGH ROMANCE IN FANTASY VIDEO GAMES

The mainstream realm of medieval fantasy is often thought of as a white-washed realm of white male heroes and heterosexual romance, a recent example being *The Lord of the Rings* or (minus the romance) the recently released *The Hobbit*. However, while this is the case in movies and literature the recent trends in fantasy video games make places for female heroes and queer relationships. Rather than a political statement, these options serve as extensions of the goals of fantasy games – namely to offer complete imaginative and narrative freedom to the player’s story. However, examining these relationships in a post-feminist context allows for greater understanding of current opinions of both female heroes and same-sex relations.

The fantasy role-playing game has existed in multiple mediums for several decades. In his book *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game*, Daniel Mackay describes the emergence of fantasy RPGs in this equation “Fantasy Literature + War Games = Role Playing Games” (Mackay, 17). As the popularity of tabletop fantasy RPGs rose, video game technology became increasingly complex to the point where fantasy RPG video games arose based on their tabletop antecedents. Early examples of this include *Neverwinter Nights* and *Baldur’s Gate* which were video games based on *Dungeons and Dragon’s* rules and campaigns.

Once this genre had been established, many fantasy video games emerged, dominating the realm of RPGs. Despite varying narratives and game systems, many of these games shared several key elements, which Mackay identifies as

1) 3D, first-person perspective, immersive gameplay

2) Non-player character interactions

3) Responsive environments

4) Quantified assessment of character abilities
5) Access to a map of the game environment (Mackay, 17)

Each of these steps was primarily designed to increase player engagement and immersion.

The necessity of techniques to draw audiences into fantasy worlds has been noted by several critics mindful of the strong relationship between audiences and texts in the fantasy genre. In his structural analysis of fantasy, Todorov outlines a key moment of hesitation where the readers digest the moment of the fantastic and resolve it, “so that the event is acknowledged as reality, or so the event is identified as the fruit of imagination or the result of an illusion.” (Todorov, 157). It is up to the author of a fantasy text to create an environment that enables the audience to suspend disbelief and perceive fantasy as reality. Phyllis Betz identifies several useful techniques, arguing that a writer must “depict the particular environment in the fullest detail. Such depictions of setting, behavior, and appearance give credibility to a time and place that at first seems extraordinarily different (Betz, 106). Revisiting the previously outlined key elements of fantasy RPGs, it is evident that they represent techniques intended to assist the player in coding the fantasy game environment as reality.

Key among these elements is the 3D environment. The 3D rendering allows for extremely realistic and detailed landscapes that seem to beg for exploration. It is this visual display that primarily differentiates the video game fantasy RPG from the tabletop fantasy RPGs. Most tabletop RPGs rely on imagination rather than pictorial representation of the worlds they take part in, and the key appeal to the video game versions is often the visual representation of previously imagined worlds. However, these beautifully rendered video games come with their own limitations, namely decreased freedom in narrative control and character creation – both of which are virtually unlimited in tabletop games (though sometimes subject to a game master’s discretion). In tabletop RPGs players can configure their character’s appearance, gender, race,
talents, back-story, motivations etc. and are only limited by their own imaginations. In video games, the narrative must be pre-set, and players are limited by pre-programmed options to cudgel together a character (character creation processes in themselves can be problematic, setting standards for body types and race. For more information on character creation and race visit this article).

To compensate for these limitations, video games have developed strategies to offer further character development to the players through narrative control and game-play. The first strategy is the open-world, or “sandbox” approach where the player is given almost total freedom within the confines of the game environment, however often at the expense of narrative. Players can choose to quest, murder, steal, and explore to their heart’s content and it lacks linear game play, meaning that the main quest can be ignored indefinitely, and there is not a linear order that quest must be accomplished in. The second approach can be characterized as a limited open world. This type of world is characterized by limited maps, the ability to travel to a set amount of locations rather than an entire world (For example, the Skyrim map offers over three hundred and forty-three available locations whereas Dragon Age: Origins offers 14), and limited interactions with both items and NPCs. However, in recompense these gamers over well-written dialogue (the ability to shape character through dialogue rather than actions), and narratives tailored for specific character traits.

An example of this dichotomy can be seen in the opening scenes of The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion and Dragon Age: Origins. In each game, the player goes through a creation process choosing the gender, race, appearance, vocation, skills, etc. to create a character. Once this is complete in Oblivion, the narrative begins with the freshly created character finding him or herself in jail during an attack on the kingdom. The player must navigate the character through
the first dungeon, but after emerging the world is open. In *Dragon Age: Origins* once character creation is complete, the character is thrust into one of six origin stories, depending on what race and class were chosen for the character.

It should be noted that here race and class differ from typical academic conceptions of the terms. Race here refers to human, elf, or dwarf whereas class refers to the chosen vocation of the character, such as warrior, mage, or rogue. Often, the variety of fantasy races has meant that sociological race has been ignored. In *Dragon Age: Origins* for instance, it is very difficulty to create a character of any color other than white. The darkest skin setting in the character creation process often makes the playable character look like they spent a day at the beach rather than reflecting the wider variety of skin colors currently represented by the human race. The only signifiers available to semiotically represent race were two hair styles related to racial stereotypes - corn rows and afro. The game was critiqued for this inability to create characters of color, a feature that was added into subsequent *Dragon Age* titles.

Significantly, sociological race does not play into the narrative whatsoever in *Dragon Age: Origins*. There are two significant characters of color within the entire game, one is a male warden killed off within the first mission and the other a rogue pirate who the playable character can engage in a threesome with. As Tanner Higgins points out in his study of fantasy massively multiplayer online role-playing games, fantasy games "Privilege whiteness and contextualize it as the default selection, rendering any alterations in coloration or racial selection exotic stylistic deviations...players and designers do not see blackness as appropriate for the discourse of heroic fantasy. As a result, reductive racial stereotypes and representations proliferate while productive and
politically disruptive racial differences are ejected or neutralized through fantastical proxies." (Higgins, 3).

Sociological race, and really any skin color other than white, are symbolically annihilated in *Dragon Age: Origins* through both the character creation process and the game's narrative, which ignores sociological race as a dimension of a character's origin story.

Instead, race becomes displaced onto fantastical creatures, the elves and dwarves, which do impact the playable character's origin story and the grand game narrative. Human characters begin with the human noble origin, and dwarves can start with the dwarf noble or dwarf commoner origin depending on their class, and elves can start with either the city elf or dalish elf origin. After the origin story has been complete, the player is allowed to travel to several destinations, but each destination is narratively tied to the main quest. Each game emphasizes customizability of character, yet one allows for character customization through actions while the other favors character customization through narrative.

Relationships then, also play a different function in open world games and limited open world games. In the *Fable* series a character can attempt to romance any NPC, male or female, with a heart over their head. To get married a player must first buy a Marital Home in the town in which they want their character to get married, flirt with the male or female NPC until the NPC turns green and give them a marriage ring. After those steps are complete, the NPC will propose to the playable character and voila, they are married. A player is allowed to have one wife or husband per town, and happy spouses will occasionally give gifts to the player. In *The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim* marriage happens after obtaining a specific item in-game. Once the player has found the Amulet of Mara then it is possible to offer marriage to an eligible NPC. Most NPCs ask the playable character to perform a quest prior to marriage. Once this is completed
then the pair visit the Temple of Mara and endure a brief wedding ceremony, and then the NPC moves in. In the optional Downloadable Content “Hearthfire” the player is even allowed to adopt children.

In both games, the steps required to pursue a heterosexual or same-sex marriage are identical and gain the player identical results, all in the spirit of defining the playable character’s story and giving depth to the game. They do not affect the main narrative; rather the options are available for the character’s self-definition. Though relationship options similarly function as a way to add depth to the playable character in limited open world games, the added narrative function of the relationships complicates the representations of sexuality within the game. The added narrative function of relationships adds weight and value to each relationship option, making these games a combination of fantasy story-telling with table-top freedom. Since these relationships cannot easily be quantified as equal, it is necessary to analyze these relationships both as a function of character development that simultaneously carry potential narrative functions that confer weight to relationship possibilities that hold the possibility of re-working genre conventions due to their dissimilarity with typical fantasy narratives.

Limited World and Narrative Impact

To analyze the potential impact of sexual relationships in limited open world games, this study will focus on dissecting the relationships and narrative of the video game Dragon Age: Origins. This is a popular video game that has sold almost three million copies to date. The story of the game revolves around the playable character, referred to as the Warden (or Hero of Ferelden after certain amount of game play), as she attempts to rid the country of Ferelden from Darkspawn, evil orc-like creatures, and restore a king to the throne. This is accomplished by
traveling to certain locations throughout Ferelden and accomplishing story missions with the help of party members that are collected as the narrative unfolds.

There are three or four available in the game depending on whether the playable character is male or female and human, dwarf. If the player is male the romance options are Morrigan, a female human witch, Leliana, a female human bard, and Zevran, a male elfin assassin. If the playable character is a human male a fourth option presents itself in the figure of Queen Anora, a human female. If the playable character is female the romance options are Alistair, a human male knight, Leliana, a female human bard, and Zevran, a male elfin assassin.

It is interesting to note that though there are many races presented throughout Dragon Age: Origins (and the Warden can be a human, an elf, or a dwarf) the Warden is only able to romance humans and elves. While this is of no consequence narratively, it demonstrates adherence to common fantasy tropes. As Phyllis Betz writes in The Lesbian Fantastic “Sexual relationships as presented in these works tend to pair human and closely human characters, elves and humans for instance. More exotic couplings, like those found in ancient myths, seem to be ignored” (Betz, 15). Though Dragon Age seems to be willing to be willing to defy conventions by incorporating same sex romance, it still adheres to the conventions that dictate which races may copulate. Finally, also in keeping with fantasy conventions, each of these options is white as is nearly every important character in the game save two.

Racial relations are instead displaced onto the fantastical relationships between humans, dwarves, and elves creating a racial hegemony where the white human male reigns. The human race in general is privileged when it comes to relationships. During the human noble origin story, the Warden can have sex with Iona, an elven female servant, or Dairren, a human male noble regardless of the Warden’s sex. This provides an early opportunity for the Warden’s sexuality to
be established, though it has no impact on the major storyline or other romances. In terms of relationships, the human male is further privileged above the human female. The romance option of Queen Anora is limited to human males, and results with the Warden marrying Anora and becoming the Prince-Consort of Ferelden. While this is the single relationship where there is no opportunity to engage in sex – and it is portrayed as a marriage of convenience rather than love – it is still an opportunity that dwarves, elves, and women are unable to take advantage of.

Marriage in general is limited to human heterosexual romances. Through the course of the game’s narrative the female human Warden is given the option to marry Alistair, next in line to the throne, and jointly rule over Ferelden. A female elf or dwarf Warden must either lose Alistair or become his mistress. These romance limitations clearly dictate a political hierarchy within the game. Both marriages involve attachment to a king or queen, can only be engaged in by humans, and involve opposite sex match ups. While it could be said that heterosexual relationships are necessary to monarchies to ensure future heirs, it should be noted that Grey Wardens are incapable of reproduction due to the joining ritual they must undergo. Without reproductive matters to concern, these marriage options equate political power to heterosexual, human (white), relationships – a near perfect recreation of current day patriarchy and fantasy tropes.

The same-sex romance options then tend to operate in a liminal place outside the established patriarchal kingdom norms. For female Wardens Leliana is the same-sex option while Zevran is the option for male Wardens. While their races differ, Leliana a human and Zevran an elf, both characters are of the rogue class, rather than warriors or mages. This is significant as the warrior and mage classes are gendered as masculine and feminine. Warriors are the physically strong characters of the game, while mages are physically weak but mentally
strong. The three characters classed as warriors are all depicted as large, burly men while the two characters classed as mages are woman, relegating strength to the realm of masculinity and mind/magic to the realm of femininity. The rogue class is the only class that has both male and female characters. It is a class where strength is coupled with agility and cunning, a liminal class straddling the physical strength of the warriors and the mental willpower of the mages. The classification of Leliana and Zevran as rogues is indicative of their own liminal gender and sexuality.

As rogues, neither Leliana nor Zevran are portrayed as overly masculine or overly feminine, which can typically be considered a positive portrayal of queer sexuality. However, keeping in mind the race and gender hierarchy the fact that neither of these characters is a human male. As an elf, Zevran’s race undermines his importance as a character within the game, devaluing him as a romance option. Zevran as the same-sex option for male Wardens has frequently been criticized for closely mirroring gay stereotypes, namely that “Zevran isn’t interested in anything more than casual sex while heterosexual romantic interests are direct about wanting a monogamous, long-term relationship” (Masaki). In early moments of the game Zevran often boasts of his sexual conquests. He is also by far the easiest character to sleep with in Dragon Age: Origins, requiring only a 60% approval rating which is significantly less that than 80% approval rating needed to sleep with other romance options. Sleeping with Zevran also triggers an achievement entitled “Easy Lover”.

To evaluate the romances in terms of narrative value, it is necessary to situate them within a medieval fantasy narrative focusing on an exceptional hero, and understand the ways which player utilize these narratives. For the first case, Lord Raglan’s “Hero of Tradition” scale delineates the steps that traditional heroes must follow. Clearly, Lord Raglan did not set out to
understand fantasy narratives, however there has been much overlap between fantasy literature and medieval literature, particularly since J.R.R. Tolkien, a Beowulf scholar, incorporated many elements of medieval tales into The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings. As one scholar points out “All one has to do to see that there is a connection between medieval romance literature and fantasy literature is to pick up a book of each and read” (Keyes, 1). Many plot points, names, and archetypes incorporated into current fantasy narratives are borrowed from their medieval kindred.

Dragon Age: Origins is guilty of this pervasive borrowing, as much as the next fantasy text. The developers of Dragon Age: Origins took pains to draw direct connections between the game-world and medieval Europe. The country of Ferelden is loosely based on medieval England, with a strong Norse influence, and Ferelden NPCs speak with a distinctive English accent. Many of the stories and myths within Dragon Age: Origins borrow elements from medieval literature. For example, the Warden can retrieve a book called “The Dane Saga” which outlines the tale of Dane and the Werewolf, a clear allusion to Beowulf.

Clearly there is much overlap between medieval literature and fantasy texts, and because of these similarities, the Warden/Hero of Ferelden follows many of Raglan’s steps for the “Hero of Tradition”. In evaluating the different origins and romance options against Raglan’s formula, it becomes clear that a heterosexual relationship, namely marriage, is an important step for the hero to accomplish. In fact, steps thirteen through twenty-two of Raglan’s scale are predicated on step twelve, “He [hero] marries a princess, often the daughter of his predecessor” (Raglan, 145). The human Warden can potentially fulfill fourteen out of twenty-two steps of the hero’s journey (for comparison Aragorn from Lord of the Rings scores a 13, King Arthur 16, Theseus 20, and Jesus 19). However, without marriage it is only possible to fulfill nine of the steps. Pursuing
same-sex romances then narratively deprives the Warden from fulfilling steps of the heroic journey which potentially de-values the same-sex romances.

Despite these findings, players appear less concerned with having the Warden fulfill the steps of the heroic journey, and more concerned with creating an ideal “happily ever after”.

Unlike the tragedies of medieval literature, the fantasy genre “presents both readers and characters with a sense of hope, a positive outcome to the turmoil faced during the adventures detailed in the narrative” (Betz, 48). Evidence of the desire for a happy ending can be seen in user’s pursuit of “the best ending”. On many *Dragon Age: Origins* forums players post their endings and evaluate those of other players. One user named War Paint writes:

Hey forum/Da bros. So I’ve been hammering at DA:O, trying to attain the best possible ending for all parties involved, so when DA:2 arrives I get to have a better world. Let me see if I got this right.

Origins: Dwarven commoners, gets declared a paragon. In love with Morrigan, so I get her ring/dialogue. Also in love with Leliana, epic glitch.

Behlen is King of Orzammar, kept the Golems. Dagna joined the Circle, told the Chantry dwarf to fuck off.

Lanaya is the Keeper of the elves.

Mages secured in Tower under Chantry, but I helped the Mage’s collective.

Alister is hardened and married to Anora, and Loghain is a Warden. So I ended up with this:

Alister and Anora are epic rulers, loved by their people.

Dalish get their land, there is tension but peace.

Dwarves moving forward under Behlen, and my boon was to send troops to help them. They push back the darkspawn. Branka sort of revolts (but hey, she’s still killing darkspawn with her fortress/golems, which is the main idea). They also have a new circle of Magi in Orzammar (this one I’m a little unsure of, also with the Chantry quest) Teagan married the chick who gives you the sword from Redcliffe and does a good job of running the place.
The chantry shows people where Andraste’s ashes are. Zevran stays. Sten leaves. Shales goes to kill darkspawn. Wynne stays to advis alister, Oghren (awakening so…) and Loghain becomes a recruiter. Leliana stays with my characters (whom she loves) and Morrigan does what she will (I did indeed make the OGB) and I got the ring dialogue. Denerim is rebuilt quickly, and the elves were granted noble status.
SO! Bros. Tell me, did I miss anything? If you think there’s a way I can POSSIBLY make my ending better, let me know. I’m getting OCD about this.

Every post I encountered dealing with the notion of “best” ending was similarly detailed. The theme that arises out of these posts (whose decisions and endings vary greatly depending on origin story and in-game decisions) is the search for the best or happiest ending. Each user attempts to make the decisions that will procure the most positive results for the kingdom at large, in addition to procuring a happy ending for the Warden and the Warden’s companions.

While there is no single opinion on what makes the best ending, there is a general consensus about what constitutes a bad ending. For example user 91.192.191.221 posted this ending:

Denerim elves were killed for blood ritual, and got no help in future.

And my about “team”

-Alistair – Killed by Anora
-Lili – killed by the warden, trying to protect the ashes
-Morrigan – left the group twice – after the wild lands and after canceling the ritual.

Killed in dlc

-Sten – left behind, to be eaten by darkspawn
-Wynn – killed, trying to protect mages
-Ogren – killed in awaking in the keep, in origins just left the group
-Loghain – was died, when he killed the archdemon

But – we with Anora are beloved rulers too.
In response to this ending many users responded with comment like “Are you kidding? This is the WORST ENDING EVER” or

HOLY!!! MAN!! What has gone into you that is probably THE WORST ENDING EVER!! I mean come on!!! You killed all of your party members, spared the guy who betrayed our king and the wardens (helped the darkspawn more likely), killed the elves who are not that mean, helped a blood mage, destroyed the circle of magi, put bhelen who’s an ass on the throne, destroyed redcliffe, killed your best friend (ALISTAIR), AND destroyed the ashes of prophet andraste…HOW DO YOU SLEEP AT NIGHT!? :P (mokho18).

From these posts and replies it appears evident that the only universally “bad” ending is one in which the player has purposefully caused as much harm to his fellow party members and to the kingdom as possible. By the user generated criteria of procuring a happy ending, the same-sex romances carry as much weight as the heterosexual romance options since a male romance with Zevran and a female romance with Lelianna both include the option to stay with the Warden and live “happily ever after”.

Looking at these endings critically mitigates the perceived “happiness” of the endings. If the Warden is engaged in a same-sex relationship then by restoring order to Ferelden, the Warden is placed outside of the heternormative society that she/he helped restore. The epilogue indicates that if the Warden pursued a relationship with Leliana that the pair continue adventuring together, roaming the land. If the Warden pursued Zevran it is mentioned that the pair runs a group of assassins together called the Antivan Crows. While the couples remain together and happy, it is telling that neither the Warden and Leliana or the Warden and Zevran can settle down within the confines of societies’ rules. They must continue living in the liminal
spaces. However, as happiness is subjective this does not necessarily render these romance narratives as less viable options than the heterosexual romances.

The romance options in *Dragon Age: Origins* then continue to act as a tool of individualization. However, the added narrative aspect added to the relationships causes some to be valued above others due to in-game biases regarding race, gender and class. Rather than expanding fantasy genre norms in terms of moving away from the patriarchal, heterosexist norms that seem to define medieval fantasy. Instead, the female hero and the same-sex options are just added in to the pre-existing social structure and forced to operate on the boundaries. This reveals another function of the myriad of choices presented to the player, to in fact distract the player from realizing how little choice or impact can actually be made within a video game fantasy world.

A player can choose gender, race, class, morality, players can have their character buy houses, steal, fight, murder, hire prostitutes, have sex, fall in love, but a player cannot change the underlying rules of a video game, nor the underlying social structure that governs the game’s world. Instead, these choices (which are just the tip of the iceberg) serve to distract the player from this fact, to give the illusion of control and agency. In this way these choices echo a postfeminist sensibility that places an emphasis on choice without situating those choices within larger structural processes. More importantly, by offering so many choices, these games support the postfeminist myth that gender equality has already been won. A player can choose to play as male or female, can choose to pursue heterosexual or same-sex relationships, therefore since there are equal choices these games suggest that men and women, and heterosexual or same-sex relationships are valued equally, which ignores the politics of the game world in which these choices are made. The emphasis on “making the right choices” further places this game in the
realm of postfeminism. The user War Paint who pleads to the forums “If you think there’s a way I can POSSIBLY make my ending better, let me know. I’m getting OCD about this” speaks to the face that not all in-game choices are considered equal. Furthermore, it speaks to the postfeminist necessity of self-surveillance, to make certain that one if making the “right” choices without paying attention to how choices are constructed as “right” through hegemonic discourse.

It is similarly necessary to situate these games within the environment in which they are created. 2012 was a landmark year for sexist affronts and feminist outcries in the gaming community. Despite growing diversity, the majority of game developers are male, and the imagined audience is typically male. Within the larger structures of video games, there is more evidence of posfeminist sensibilities. Debbie Ging points out

All of the core tropes of postfeminism – choice, freedom, sexual aggression, a return to gender essentialism, competitive individualism, objectification of the female body, blindness to the masculinist nature of “normative” forms of cultural expression and the eschewal of prejudicial barriers to equality – are also key feature of most (male-oriented) digital games (Ging, 5).

While this chapter has not fully discussed each of those tropes in detail, suffice it to say that the majority are also common in fantasy video games. The inclusion of romance options and sexual scenes can be interpreted as a postfeminist trope dually functioning as a sign of sexual aggression, objectification, individualism, and patriarchal norms. The multitudes of choices that signal participation in the fantasy genre simultaneously coincide with postfeminist and neoliberal discourses of individualism, objectification, and an unwillingness to question masculinist norms.

Convergence Culture
Despite these criticisms, games like *The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim*, *Fable 3*, and *Dragon Age: Origins* are three games that actually allow sexuality to be represented at all—and all things considered—in a mostly positive light. While these portrayals do not ultimately challenge the worlds they are a party of, their existence within the mainstream fantasy world is important. When discussing lesbian portrayals in literature, Betz quotes Marilyn Farwell saying, “The lesbian character in popular lesbian fiction offers a sense of power to hungry lesbian readers who have encountered little either inside or outside of school which portrays them with anything but disdain” (Betz, 19). The simple presence of well-written gay and lesbian romances within *Dragon Age: Origins* can be valued for a positive portrayal of two women (or men) falling in love.

Fan support of the inclusions of same-sex relationships have also been a key element to their continued existence. Bioware received such positive feedback for the inclusion of Zevran and Leliana in *Dragon Age: Origins*, that in *Dragon Age: II* every romanceable character can be romanced by a male or female playable character. Though some have criticized Bioware for including “gay” options at player’s requests rather than taking a political stance as a company, this criticism affords players with increased agency. While player’s in-game choices may not necessarily matter, they have successfully petitioned for greater media representation and have been able to change some expectations surrounding player desires. If the assumed audience for most AAA video game titles is the straight male gamer, then the hugely positive reception and applause for same-sex representations in games like *Dragon Age: Origins* paves way for more sexual diversity in the gaming industry.

Similarly, as mainstream media artifacts, these games pave the way for continued representation of queer sexualities in future fantasy franchises. In terms of the fantasy genre, one
scholar argues that “Increasingly, we come to recognize a scene as medieval because it resembles other cinematic medieval scenes, whether serious or parodic” for example audiences might expect that a woman living in the woods or countryside will be a witch – a trope *Dragon Age: Origins* and *Skyrim* take advantage of. (Trigg, 102). If gay and lesbian relationships are represented often enough in cinematic fashion – through video games or otherwise – then those representations can become a part of the fantasy genre imaginary, securing continued representation in future texts. Choice then, in these fantastic video games becomes polysemic, functioning as a trope of fantasy games, signifying its participation in postfeminist sensibilities, with a potentiality to increase sexual diversity within the fantasy genre.

This potentiality seems to apply only to video games. Looking at the non-video game *Dragon Age* texts demonstrates a continued adherence to medieval fantasy norms, and do not appear to offer a place for same-sex relationships. *Dragon Age: Volume One* written by Orson Scott Card with Aaron Johnson, the first graphic novel set in the Dragon Age universe focuses on the illicit and tragic romance between a mage and a Templar, and the child they produce – Gleam. Clearly the whole novel revolves around the after-effects of a heterosexual romance, unsurprising both because of the genre and because of the author. Though it is extra-textual information, many may remember that Orson Scott Card is an anti-gay activist, who famously wrote in a 1990 essay titled “The Hypocrites of Homosexuality” laws that ban gay sex need to “remain on the books…to be used when necessary to send a clear message that those who flagrantly violate society’s regulation of sexual behavior cannot be permitted to remain as acceptable, equal citizens within that society." Thus the very author put in charge of the book limited any potential same-sex romance that could have occurred.
There were no such limitations in the other texts, yet they similarly focus on heterosexual romance or refrain from discussing romance at all. *Dragon Age: Redemption* is a live-action movie written by and starring Felicia Day in 2011. That story revolves around an elven assassin played by Day sent to kill an evil mage. During this quest she meets and begins to fall for a Templar. She also teams up with an Elf named Josmael, who seeks to save his love from the evil mage. Not one but two romance stories are presented in this work, which both feature heterosexual couplings. Significantly, Tallis is saved by the end of the movie by the power of heterosexual love. The Templar dies, but through his love and the talisman he leaves her, Tallis determines to set herself on a new (and presumably better morally) life path, re-integrated into society by a heterosexual relationship.

Both of these texts, set in the Dragon Age world, do not incorporate the sexual diversity that so many players enjoyed in *Dragon Age: Origins*. Rather, in these texts where narrative is ultimately left to the producers rather than the consumer, the narratives reflect strong heteronormative values. The choices available in *Dragon Age: Origins* are relegated specifically to the realm of video games where the player can choose to tell his own story. If a player wants a narrative about a same-sex romance then the payer can create one through the video game, but the books, comics, and movies continue to reflect heteronormative, patriarchal assumptions associated with the fantasy genre.

This is not to devalue the impact these choices can have on individuals playing video games. For example, the ability to create same-sex relationships can be a profound experience for players unused to having those options. An article on Kotaku, a prominent gaming website titled “How *Dragon Age II* Helped One Young Gamer Come To Terms with Coming Out of the Closet” speaks to the impact that the availability of relationship options in these video games can
have on individuals. However, the key word here is individuals. The proliferation of customizable options within fantasy games provides completely customizable experiences for individuals, not larger audiences. Individual experiences can be empowering (or not) based on any specific player’s decisions, but they appear to ultimately have no larger impact on the genre in which they participate.

Simultaneously, empowering experiences in-game do not necessarily have an impact on one's level of empowerment in the wider gaming community. Whether a player chooses to play as a man or woman, gay or straight has very little impact on how players engage each other in both online forums and multiplayer games. Instead, normative notions of gender often displayed through the representation of archetypal heroes and heroines continue to discipline players once games are turned off. The next chapter will begin to look out how these games create a discourse surrounding the notion of "gamer", and how this discourse disciplines the participants that fall outside the self-defined in-group of young, white men.
CHAPTER IV: POST-STRUCTURALISM AND THE FEMALE GAMING SUBJECT

Women within the videogame community have frequently stumbled across sexism, misogyny and personal attacks. To understand and begin to strategically challenge this sexism within the gaming community, it is important to examine how these attitudes towards women have been produced. In this examination, post-structuralist feminist theories are useful for illuminating the discourses that produce expectations and attitudes towards women in the video-game community. Joan Scott defines discourse as an “historically, socially, and institutionally specific structure of statements, terms, categories and beliefs” that is contained "or expressed in organizations and institutions as well as in words; all of these constitute texts or documents to be read" (Scott, 35). Using this definition, I will examine how in-game representations of women interact with various discourses to produce the female gaming subject as a sexual object for male consumption.

The videogame community is typically imagined as a boys’ club where women are regarded as mythical and as rare as unicorns. Ironically, according to the Entertainment Software Association, 47% of gamers are currently female and “women 18 or older represent a significantly greater portion of the game-playing population (30%) than boys age 17 or younger (18%)” (ESA, 3). The male teenage gamer is losing dominance demographically as more and more women play games. Since the percentage of women gamers is growing, this produces a disconnect between the way that the videogame community perceives itself and the reality that the videogame community is no longer a male-only domain.

This disconnect is most obvious when comparing the number of male protagonists in video games to the number of female protagonists in video games, and the number of female developers versus male developers. Typically, women are underrepresented in video games. As
mentioned in the introduction, many content analysis studies have addressed the fact that women are represented far less often than men are in games. These statistics speak to a lack which demonstrates that the most likely place for women in video games is their absence (Dietz, 433). This absence of female characters in video games has contributed to the overall discourse of gender in which there the expectation is lack of women, and the women that are present are highly stereotyped.

Despite the reality that women compose almost half of the current game-playing community, the imagined community of video gamers remains male dominated in part due to the erasure of women from the games themselves. Benedict Anderson argues that "all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contacts (and perhaps even these) are imagined" (6). Though Anderson is focused on examining nations, the idea that communities are imagined is particularly apt for describing the gaming community, whose members primarily interact through online communications and online multiplayer games. As Anderson argues, the formation of imagined communities was aided by the printing of newspapers in vernacular languages. This print-capitalism facilitated "unified fields of exchange and communication" which allowed readers to imagine "fellow-readers, to whom they were connected through print...the embryo of the nationally imagined community" (44). For the gaming community, video games function like newspapers in creating the image of the imagined community. The lack of female representation within games impacts the imagined gaming community, so that the demographics of gender in the imagined community do not match up to the actual amount of male and female players.

Examining how the few representations of women are portrayed in video games further explicates the language that these games produce about women. In the early stages of video
game creation, women were not often available as playable characters and were primarily used as a catalyst for whatever quest the main, male character had to embark upon. The female characters can further be broken down into "good" and "bad" women. Visually, Gailey points out, good women “are shown as cute and unthreatening, usually sequestered invisibly in castles” (87). They only become visible when being rescued or captured, both often at the hands of men.

The portrayal of these women as cute, unthreatening and ultimately sequestered draws upon the discourse of separate spheres for men and women. This discourse gained prominence during the Industrial Revolution and prescribed that women should stay in the home or private sphere due to their weak biology while men, due to their superior biology, should remain in charge of the public domain. While recent research has pointed out that women's roles were most likely more fluid than the discourse of separate spheres would have people believe, this same discourse has continued to affect women in the United States. Despite the strong push of second-wave feminism decrying notions of separate public and private spheres with the cry "the personal is political," there remains a gendered separation of spheres in early video games.

The dynamics between the princess and the hero very much resemble the prescribed roles of the private/public spheres for women and men. Princess Peach is forever at home in her castle (private sphere), and forever too weak to fight off the invading Bowser. Only Mario is strong and brave enough to navigate through the levels that are infested with Bowser's minions (public sphere). Zelda, when not captured, typically resides within her castle, sending Link on public quests because she cannot leave the private domain of her castle. These characters can be seen as productions of the separate spheres discourse. The fact that the princesses in video games draw upon this discourse, historically originating well over a hundred years ago, speaks to a male fantasy of a time when "women knew their place". This theme which is repeated in online
gaming interactions where men frequently tell women to "go back to the kitchen where you belong."

This representation of women as helpless sexual objects has been repeatedly reinforced through hundreds of video games, from *Super Mario Bros.* to *Kingdom Hearts*, to *Duke Nukem 3D* to name a few from various genres. These position women as rewards for the skill to maneuver an avatar, an attitude that can translate to real life in the form of entitlement. A second way women are offered as reward is through the availability of unlockable characters. By meeting certain challenge requirements, players can unlock a female character to use in-game. The reward functions to give the player something nice to look at as they play a game functioning as another type of reward for beating a game, or fulfilling certain difficult requirements.

Cute and unthreatening are not adjectives many would use to describe the female characters that arose out of later consoles. As hardware and software improved, so did the volume of female characters. Many female characters are now found in fighting games such as the *Mortal Kombat* series, the *Tekken*, and the *Street Fighter* series. The women in these games are scantily clad and overly sexualized. Likewise they employ comic book physics, which is to say their curvy proportions defy gravity and their costumes appear painted on (because that's the only way they could stay on). If fighting games are to be believed, women can only fight properly when maximizing the amount of skin shown. This principle also extends to adventure games, another genre that features playable female characters. In the game *Bayonetta*, the titular heroine gains power from her hair, which also forms a bodysuit that clothes her. As Bayonetta powers up, she loses her clothing. The more naked she is, the more powerful Bayonetta becomes.
The over sexualization is not always so blatantly the case with female characters in video games. Both Lara Croft and Samus Aran, two of the more famous female characters of video games, are more subtly sexualized when compared to characters like Bayonetta or BloodRayne. Samus Aran, the character from the *Metroid* series, appears in full body armor that hides her gender. In the first *Metroid* game, players were often unaware of Samus’s gender until the end of the game when she took off her suit to reveal a buxom woman. Considering how pixilated this image was, it cannot be considered very sexualizing in and of itself. However, the faster the player beat the game, the more clothes Samus would take off, once again positioning a female character into the function of motivation and reward.

Lara Croft was designed to attempt to grab a female audience while still catering to a male audience. A certain mythos surrounds the initial creation of Lara, particularly around her bust specifications. As previously mentioned, according to Tomb Raider lore, the size of Lara's breasts was an accidental slip of the mouse, increasing their size 150%. Real or not, this anecdote speaks to the atmosphere in which female characters are imagined. Returning to Gailey’s article, it can be said that even today, 19 years after Gailey’s article was published, “the depiction of women in today’s games is consonant with a range of masculine (both boys’ and men’s) fantasies” (Gailey, 86).

These powerful and sexy women have their roots in a more current discourse of post feminism. As many film critics have pointed out, the discourse of postfeminism weds choice and individual freedom "to images of sexuality in which women apparently choose to be seen as sexual objects because it suits their liberated interests" (Purse, 188). Movies like *Tomb Raider, Resident Evil, Aeon Flux, Charlie's Angels*, etc., portray women as physically capable and highly sexualized in a manner which is "often characterized as an active choice" (Purse, 188). In this
manner, postfeminism ties women's empowerment, liberation, choice, and power to their sexuality. The previously mentioned video game characters like Lara Croft or Bayonetta, along with the female fighters, can also be seen as products of a postfeminist discourse. The depiction of characters that are physically capable creates an illusion of subjectivity, which is then used to explain that these characters choose to present themselves in a sexual manner, when in reality the sexualized representation undermines this subjectivity, thus turning the characters into sex objects. In turn, these representations of powerful and sexy women contribute to a discourse that positions women as objects rather than subjects within the gaming community.

Though these powerful and sexy women differ from other unthreatening and cute portrayals, what they both have in common is that they are intended for male consumption. The princesses are literally presented as rewards for masculine accomplishment. They reside in private domiciles, drawing on a discourse of separate spheres. The tough women, on the other hand, are presented as strong, but still available for male visual consumption which draws on a post-feminist discourse of sexuality and power. These portrayals produce a language of femininity within the gaming community. As Judith Butler has argued, "gender is in no way a stable identity of locus of agency from which various acts proceed, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts" (Butler, 419, emphasis in original). The repetition of images of the princess or tough woman throughout many video games has produced two gender roles for women in the gaming community. As Rosalind Gill has argued, there are connections "between representational practice and subjectivity—for example the ways in which a cultural habitat or images may be internalized to form a pernicious disciplinary regime" (438). The representations of princesses and tough women have been internalized within the gaming community and this internalization produces female gaming
subjects as sexual objects, limiting the ways in which women are allowed to engage the gaming community. On the one hand, women are typically not imagined as members of the gaming community. On the other hand, when women present themselves in the community, they are expected to be both highly skilled and still sexually available to be accepted as "gamers."

The paradoxical nature of this discourse surrounding women in video games coalesces through the stereotypes of "gamer girls" and the use of booth babes at video game conferences or "cons." Booth babes are women that game companies hire to drive consumer demand for their product by interacting with (male) customers. Although there has been some debate about the appropriateness of employing these models, they have become a fixture at many gaming cons. Conference goers frequently take pictures with these models, and gaming websites often devote articles to the "sexiest booth babes" of any given year and conference. These booth babes serve no true purpose except to be available to the conference attendees and to look pretty for the cameras. In a way they are the real life equivalent of the princesses. Booth babes must remain in their respective booths while the attendees are free to roam. They serve as eye candy for the attendees, and they must pay attention to the gamers that demand it for as long as demanded.

The term "booth babe" can also serve as a derogatory term for women who claim the title of "gamer" but are not viewed as such within the gaming community. The Frag Dolls are a group of women hired by game company Ubisoft to promote their video games and represent the presence of women in the game industry. While these women are professional gamers participating in large game tournaments each year, they are frequently criticized as glorified booth babes due to the fact that they are paid to interact with male gamers and promote games. While the Frag Dolls are not typically depicted as overly sexualized, each Frag Doll is an attractive woman, mostly likely a requirement for representing and promoting Ubisoft. The Frag
Dolls then can be seen as postfeminist subjects. They are all legitimately skilled players and they also appear to choose to be depicted as attractive women. However, the fact that they were hired for both their looks and skill undermines the "choice" of appearance for the Frag Dolls. In this way they resemble the tough girl game character. The Frag Dolls are depicted as liberated and powerful through their inclusion in tournaments and the gaming industry, but they can also be understood as booth babes in the sense that they are attractive women representing a company for profit, which undermines their liberated image.

While booth babes serve as one access point for women into the gaming world, the stereotype of "gamer girl" serves as another access point. The term "gamer girl" currently denotes a female gamer who uses her sexuality rather than her skills alone to gain attention in the gaming community. Also, the term "girl" here limits the category to women under thirty. Websites like hotgamergirls.com ask self-identified gamer girls to post pictures of themselves along with a list of interests. The representations of sexually available women in games have been internalized by the gaming community so that this discourse produces female gaming subjects that "choose" to present sexualized images of themselves to the community. A crucial aspect of this related to post-feminism is that "women are presented as not seeking men's approval but pleasing themselves, and, in doing so, just happen to win men's admiration" (Gill, 437). The Hot Gamer Girls website is advertised as a "community of Gamer Girls and their fans who support them," making it seem like a website for girls to connect with other girls. However, female gamer subjects are often disciplined to present themselves sexually through the discourse created by representations of female characters in videogames.

One complicated example of this is cosplay (costume play) that goes on at gaming conventions. Fans of games enjoy dressing up as favorite characters, to demonstrate their
enjoyment of particular franchises. For women intending to cosplay female characters, this primarily means that they must present themselves in an extremely sexualized manner, as options for non-sexualized women in video games are very small. These cosplayers have numerous options of female characters to cosplay (if the woman happens to be white or Asian, there is still little diversity among female characters outside of caucasian and Asian), but although cosplaying is an activity engaged in for oneself, the very act of cosplaying for women means presenting oneself in a sexually pleasing manner. Though often it is not the intention, women dressing up as sexualized characters end up reinforcing the discourse that women in gaming must be available for objectification, and female cosplayers often suffer a large amount of unwanted and largely sexist male attention.

Many women have blogged about experiences of cosplaying sexy women, and I would like to call attention to one such example. During the 2012 Comic Con, a con that focuses on geekery in general from film, comics, television, to video games, one cosplayer named Mandy decided to go as the Black Cat, a character originating from Marvel Comics. During her day at Comic Con, Mandy writes that she was interviewed by a video channel that asked to interview her about her Comic Con experience. In Mandy's words, the interview went like this:

**Him:** I'm here with....  
**Me:** Mandy, aka Felicia Hardy aka Black Cat  
**Him:** ...and she is HOT. Do you think I'm hot enough to pull that off?  
**Me:** Uh, I'm not so sure, I've never seen you in drag.  
**Him:** I've got a great ass. Go on, spank me  
**Me:** (look at his large ass, popped up mere inches away from me then look into the camera like *are you kidding me.* No thanks. I may hurt you, I'm a lot stronger than I look.  
**Him:** Aw come on!  
**Me:** No, seriously. Stop.  
**Him:** Damn, alright! Well let me ask you an important question then...what is your cup size?  
**Me:** (big talk show smile) That is actually none of your fucking business  
**Him:** Oh I think that means to say she's a C.
Me: I actually have no breasts at all, what you see is just all of the fat from my midsection pulled up to my chest and carefully held in place with this corset. It's really uncomfortable, I don't know why I do it.

Him: (to the male crows) Aw, come on what do you guys think? C cup?
- a few males start to shout out cup sizes as I stand there looking at this guy like this has to be a fucking joke, then look at the crowd and see that no amount of witty banter of feistiness will stop making this whole thing fucking dumb. It was clearly a ploy to single out cosplaying women to get them to talk sexual innuendos and flirt with this asshole and let him talk down to them simple because they were in costume and were attractive. Whether I'm in a skintight catsuit or not, I'm a fucking professional in everything I do and I don't need to play nice for this idiot

Me: This is not an interview, this is degrading. I'm done. (I walk away)

Him: (clearly dumbfounded and surprised) ..Come on, it's all in good fun!

Me: Being degraded is fun? That was unprofessional and I hope that isn't your day job because you can't interview for shit, my man. (The Grind Haus)

I've included the entire interview here because this occurrence is an extremely illustrative example of the paradox that women in gaming (and women in geekdom) face when they cosplay. Mandy in this instance clearly wanted to dress as Black Cat as a way of both self-empowerment and showing off her costuming skills. However, because the Black Cat is a sexualized character available for visual consumption in comic books, and Mandy as the Black Cat presented an attractive image, the men at the con treated Mandy as if she was similarly sexually available.

Though her story received many virtual high fives, and supportive comments from other female cosplayers and male allies, there were a number of comments that ran along the lines of "if you don't want to be sexually harassed, then don't dress in a sexual manner" in essence using the standard victim-blaming argument. While it is clear that women should be able to wear whatever type of clothing they want to without being sexually harassed, there is another point that critics are failing to realize. The language of gender in the videogame community (and comics I would argue) fails to offer women subjectivity that is not tied to sexuality. Though sexuality, through postfeminism, is seen as an empowering choice, there are actually no other choices available for female cosplayers. Representations of women in games have produced a
discourse that produces women in gaming as sexual objects. Women who fail to adhere to the structures of this discourse or protest it are disciplined and discounted. If she internalizes the gendered discourse of gaming, a female gamer is referred to as either an attention whore or slutty and not a real gamer. Furthermore, if she rejects the role of sexual object and attempts to exercise agency she is dismissed as ugly and fat and not a real gamer.

Websites like "Fat Ugly or Slutty" are testaments to the production of roles to which women are relegated within the online gaming community. Fat Ugly or Slutty is a website where female gamers can submit screen shots of male gamers harassing them. Submissions are often screenshots of messages that female gamers receive after playing online games. The comments can range from telling a woman to go back to the kitchen where she belongs (invoking the notion of separate spheres) to comments on the sexuality of the female players. For example, one submission on the website reads "I Just watched you play Halo 4 at RTX (i'm late I know) and your CHEST is awesome! Nice Halo play too. Have a great day!" What was first commented on was the woman's attractiveness, and only secondarily were her skills mentioned. The first comment on the woman's chest seemed to validate the second comment about the woman's skill, tying sexuality and skill together.

Women who try to negotiate the girl gamer discourse are disciplined through attacks on their gaming credentials and offers of sex. One woman gamer, bunnyXablaze, posted a YouTube video on the "Gamer Girl Stereotype." In the opening of the video she says that

Every time I open my mouth in a public match I hear three things. It's universal, every guy says. The three things are, first off: I'm either an attention whore/slut. I'm a lesbian. Or I'm fat. And this is how people actually see me over the mic. (bunnyXabl1ze).

When women play games in which their voices can be heard over microphones, it allows women's voices to be singled out and targeted for their difference. As this astute gamer points
out, a lot is read from a female voice and she goes on to humorously overact the different stereotypes of slut, lesbian, and fat largely calling attention to the absurdity of female gamers being tied to one of those three categories. She creates a great commentary on the stereotypes and how ridiculous they are, while openly addressing the gaming community through the public forum of YouTube to stop harassing women gamers.

Though there were many positive responses to this video (and over 100,000 views), there were an almost equal amount of negative responses (600 likes to 400 dislikes). Many of the attacks on the video came in the form of offers of sexual intercourse, while the rest relied on discrediting bunnyXabl1ze's gaming skills to re-frame her as an attention whore. One example of this comes from user FaggotFairyPrincess, who commented

Anyone ever notice how all these so called "gamers girls" only play COD [Call of Duty]? The SHITTIEST game known to humanity. If half these girls were gamers they'd have 150+ games on their steam account like me. This girl, like many others is a poser, and attention whore. NOT a gamer, and she's a disgrace to real gamers like me.

This attack on the bunnyXabl1ze's skills is an attack on gamer credibility. If a woman's credibility as a gamer can be destroyed then she can be relegated into the categories of fat/ugly, attention whore, or lesbian.

Advertising has continued to fuel the discourse discrediting women as gamers. For the release of the Nintendo 3DS, Nintendo released several commercials of famous women using the 3DS saying things like "I'm not a gamer. With my 3DS I'm..." In one such commercial, Dianna Agron, an actress made popular by Glee, emotes "I'm not a gamer. With my 3DS I'm an artist" advertising the game Art Academy for the 3DS. As one author from Destructoid, a popular gaming website, points out "For people who are normal, sane and rational, these are innocent ads that are reaching out to girls who don't play videogames that often" (cracked bat). However, the
ads bring up controversy over the gamer identity, clearly positioning women (none of the ads with "I'm not a gamer" tag line featured men) as non-gamers.

A similar occurrence happened before the release of *Borderlands 2* in September, 2012. Lead designer John Hemingway was discussing a skill tree being developed for a new character in the game. This particular skill tree includes abilities that make it easier for players without a good deal of game knowledge to hit their targets, making the game accessible for a larger audience. In an interview, Hemingway referred to this character and skill tree as "girlfriend mode." His comment relates several assumptions about women's abilities as gamers, namely that they need an easier skill tree to be able to function in games. Granted, the comment resonated with many gamers whose significant others were not necessarily skilled. However, the gendered nature of the comment continues to display the difficulty that women face in being recognized as proficient in the community.

The refusal to acknowledge women as gamers occurs at the professional level as well. In 2012, games journalist Katie Williams wrote of an incident at a gaming expo where the PR reps would not allow her to play games (Williams). Instead, seeing that she was a woman, they insisted on demonstrating the games for her, while allowing her male colleagues to play the games for themselves. Mia Consalvo writes, "Each event taken in isolation is troubling enough, but chaining them together into a timeline demonstrates how the individual links are not actually isolated incidents at all but illustrate a pattern of a misogynistic gamer culture and patriarchal privilege attempting to (re)assert its position." (Consalvo, 1).

The repetition of these images can have multiple effects, one of which is a reinforcement of postfeminist sensibilities. While over-sexualization is just one aspect of the videogame heroine, the other being a proclivity for violence and destruction, the image of the heroine is the
aspect that is women are best able to perform (violence and destruction being frowned upon outside of video game worlds). The repetition of postfeminist protagonists, sexy badasses, can reinforce the notions of post-feminism that women are equal, and self-sexualization is just a depoliticized choice while simultaneously offering feelings of empowerment through the availability of a female character with intense fighting skills.

The discourse produced by the princess and tough-girl images within video games forecloses the possibility of a female gaming subject. Instead, the discourse continuously positions women as sexual objects. Booth babes can be seen as the real-life embodiments of the princess stereotypes, while the stereotypes associated with "gamer girls" and the reception of the Frag Dolls demonstrate the ways that the tough-girl image is used to deny women the possibility of subjectivity. If female gamers internalize this discourse and post sexualized images of themselves then they are attention whores which completely discredits whatever gaming skills they might have. If they reject the discourse, they are disciplined by name-calling and their gaming skills are again disregarded. If women reject this discourse and refuse the role of "girl gamer" then they are disciplined and discounted as gamers because "real" female gamers need to be attractive and heterosexual to contribute to the community. The representations of women in video games creates a sexist discourse around the female gamer subject that makes it impossible for them to be acknowledged as anything other than sex objects if they want to participate in the imagined gaming community.
CONCLUSION

As the medium expands and matures, the field of videogame studies is more important than ever - particularly from a feminist perspective. As demonstrated in the last chapter, video games influence relations between the individuals in the gaming community - a community that is rapidly growing through smartphone and social media games. The rejected injection of new demographics in the community has generally set the self-identified "hard core" gamers (perceived as young, typically white men aged 15-25) on edge and stiffened the self-policed in-group and out-group barriers. The growing number of publicly embarrassing (and often morally reprehensible) incidents in the gaming community towards women and other minorities speaks to this period of unrest.

On the one hand these incidents, along with growing public interest in cyber bullying, have pulled the gaming community to the forefront of American issues. The tragic Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting catapulted both the gun-debate, and the violence and video game debate towards the top of many people's political priorities. While for some the violence in videogames has become the main political issue, in his 2013 State of the Union Address, President Barack Obama spoke to the fear that videogames and television are raising the youth of the American Nation. President Obama linked video games to academic underachievement when saying, "There is no program or policy for a mother or father who will... put away the video games, and read to their child. I speak to you not just as a president, but as a father when I say that responsibility for our children's education must begin at home."

However, while political attention to video games has intensified in the past year, the influx of attention and new demographics of players has also made new types of games possible. While traditional genres like first-person shooters and role-playing games are still currently in
production, the industry has seen the arrival of indie (independent) games produced through outlets such as Steam Greenlight, Xbox-Live Arcade, iOS, Android and Kickstarter. In 2012, more money was raised on Kickstarter in the "game" category than any other category on the website. Many of these games have begun to expand current notions of what we mean by the term "video game," and offer new and potentially more inclusive gameplay (although optimism should be tempered by the knowledge of the heternormative, patriarchal, misogynist history of the gaming industry).

Thatgamecompany, the producers of games such as Flow (2007) and Flower (2009) released Journey in 2012. Journey, more than a story or game-play provides the experience for which the game is titled. Rather than shooting, racing, competing, leveling, the game, with no written or verbal narrative, asks the player to explore the world, and actively engage in interpreting what exactly the game experience means to each individual player. Games as experience has become an entirely new avenue for game producers to explore, and another thread for scholars to untangle when examining the meaning and function of video games.

Women in the gaming community have begun taking new open-source game-making tools to tell new and different stories than traditional video games. Dys4ia is a game created by Anna Anthropy to recount her experiences of gender identity disorder and hormone replacement therapy. Level 1 is called "Gender Bullshit" and recounts some of the experiences that lead Anthropy to consider hormone replacement therapy. The player in the game must move the mouse and interact with each scene in some way to complete the level. Mattie Brice, a games critic and activist coded the game Mainichi as an experiment in sharing a personal experience through game mechanics. It helps communicated daily occurrences that happen in my life as a mixed transgender woman. It also explores the difficulty in expressing these feelings in words. As well, it stands as a
commentary of how we currently use game design for broad strokes of universal experiences instead of the hyper-personal, and often exclude minority voices.

In this way the gaming industry is seeing diverse voices picking up new tools to create experiences far different than what is considered the core gaming experience.

Another avenue for new games has been through combining game elements with interactive fiction. The open source webtool Twine, has been utilized by several game developers, feminist and not, to tell personal stories through the combination of gaming and interactive fiction. *Even Cowgirls Bleed* a short interactive game by indie developer and writer Christine Love turns the traditional mouse icon into crosshairs, facilitating a first-person shooter interactive fiction surrounding a young woman on her journey to become a gunslinging cowgirl, and the fate she meets while romancing another woman. *Depression Quest*, a game designed by Zoe Quinn, Patrick Lindsey, and Isaac Schankler is a game that attempts to provide an experience of depression to the player. One of the main goals of the game is to "illustrate as clearly as possible what depression is like, so that is may be better understood by people without depression." (Depression Quest).

These new games and new experiences are beginning to change the way in which some portions of the industry imagine themselves, if not changing the way traditional games are perceived, then at least providing new avenues for diverse games and experiences to emerge. The upcoming release of the Ouya, a crowd-sourced video game console, continues to place an emphasis on indie and free-to-play games. In order for a game to be featured on the Ouya, it must function in some free-to-play capacity. If the system can attract well-made games, it has the potential to upset the entire video game market economy by forcing production companies to imagine new pricing models, and new productions methods for previously $60 game titles. In turn, the Ouya's focus on indie games makes it the first console that might be particularly open to
presenting games like *Dis4ia, Mainichi, Even Cowgirls Bleed* and others to a larger console-playing market.

Overall, the video game world is in a state of flux, with almost all predictions for the aftermath of the current upheaval too premature to make. However, simply because the state of the industry is in upheaval does not mean that the academic study of games needs to be. While games studies has really only developed steadily over the past fifteen to twenty years, this flux in the industry provides a time for scholars to re-evaluate the assumptions, methodologies, and theoretical foundations of games scholarship. As scholars we need to understand the history of the video game industry to better account for the changes that the industry is currently undergoing.

In terms of gender studies and video games, this means beginning to understand the historical matrix of powers surrounding the production and consumption of video games in order to better combat and understand these structures in the future. This also means realizing that video games are a global phenomenon not located solely in America. Sony and Nintendo, two of the three top gaming console companies, originate in Japan as do a large quantity of video games. More study needs to be done on the way Japanese games are localized for a Western context, but also how American games and narratives are received in Japan. When studying the representations of gender in these contexts it will be important to situate games, narratives, play, and mythology into specific socioeconomic, cultural locations to understand how diverse ethnic cultures interpret these representations in different contexts.

Ultimately, this thesis has begun to analyze how representations of femininity are received in a Western media climate filled with pre-established notions of the action heroine and postfeminism. This marks a very modest attempt at beginning to look at the gendered structures
of power present in the representation of femininity in video games. In the future, more work needs to be done in this area to fully examine the ideas and images surrounding gender that are being presented to players through diverse games. With the new influences of indie games however, hopefully the video game genre will not mindlessly replicate the current image of the action heroine the way that she has stagnated through film. Instead, through these new trends there becomes the potential for video game heroines to evolve and update the image of the action heroine.
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